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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

ISAAC ASIMOV
The Double-Ended Candle

JUNE

75c • UK 30p.

new novelets by
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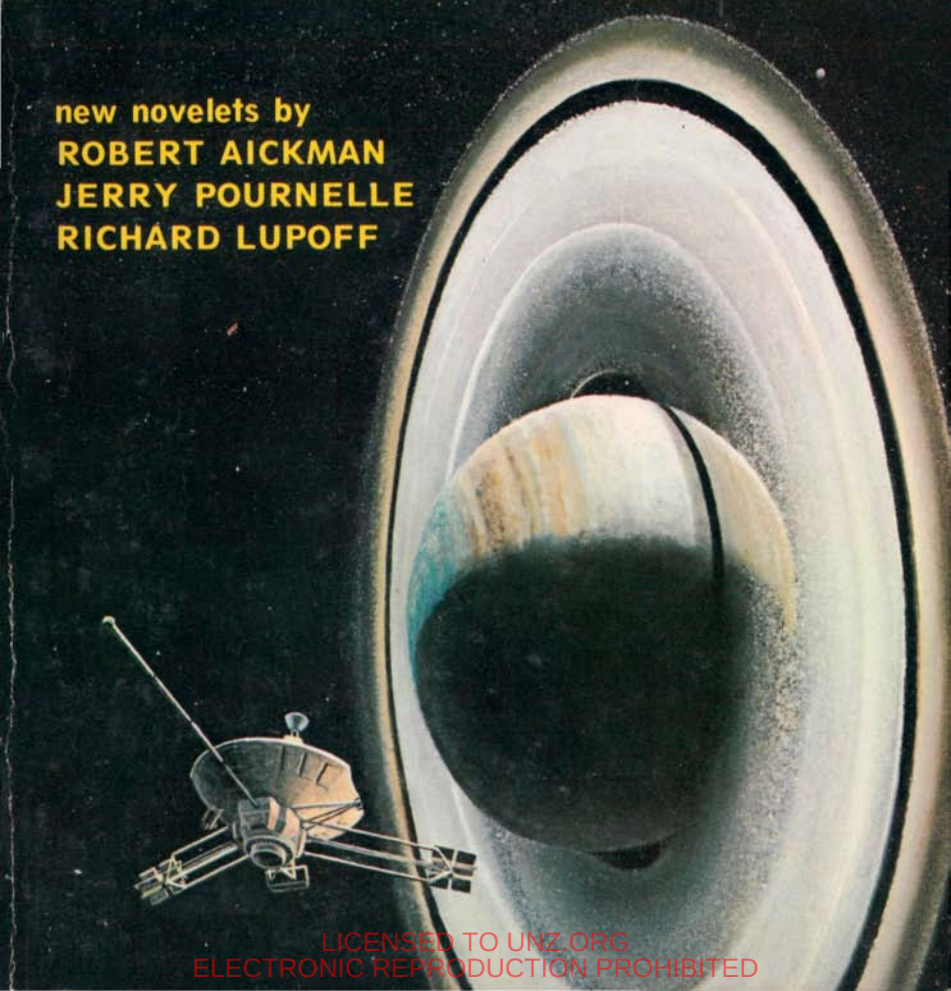
JERRY POURNELLE
RICHARD LUPOFF



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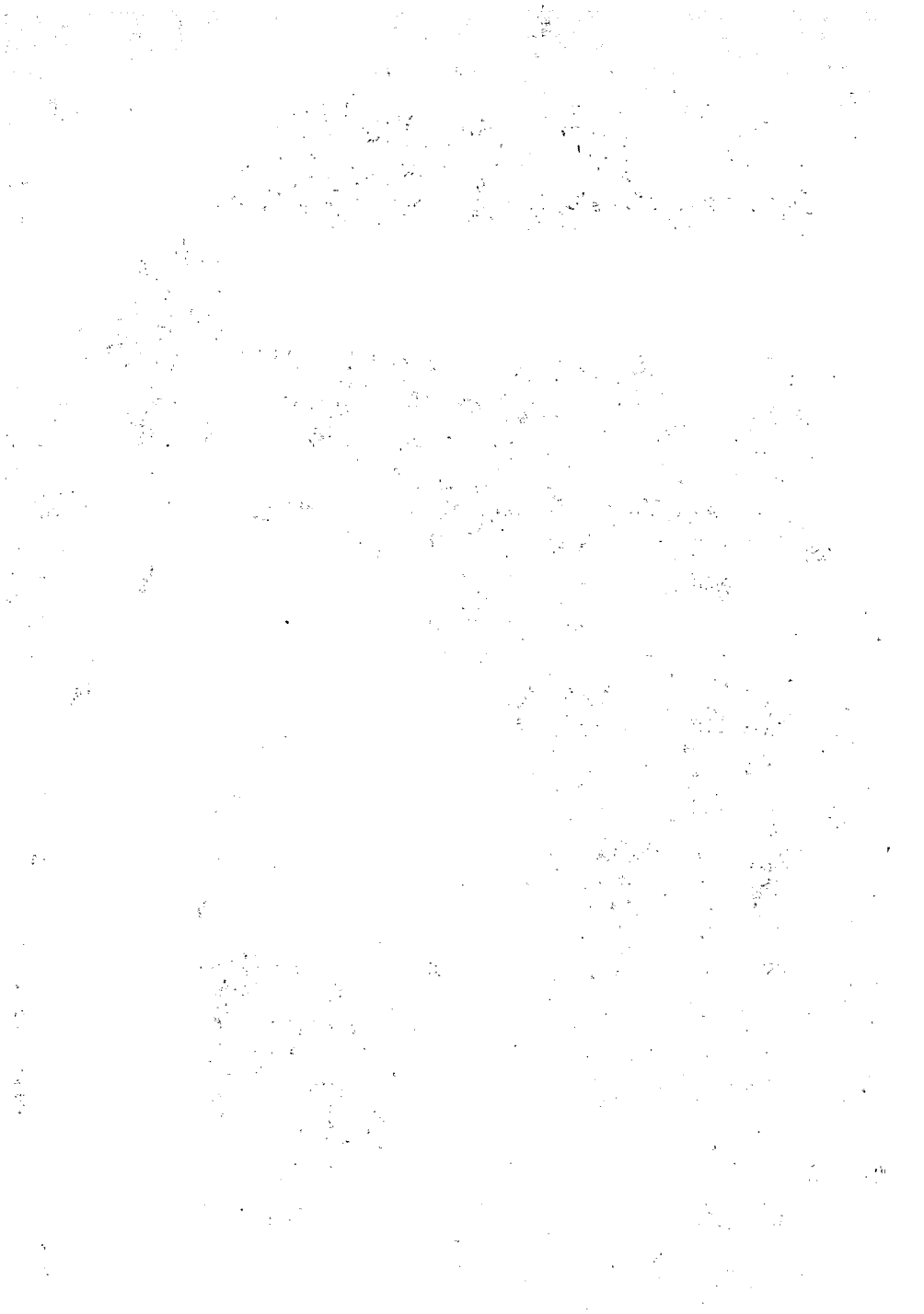

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Enforcer

by JERRY POURNELLE

Grey water crashed over the bows, throwing spray droplets high in the air where they were caught by the screaming wind and whipped down the ship's length. The tug plunged into the trough of the wave, seeming to stand on her bows, then leveled off and began the climb up the next wave. That one broke across the deck with a crashing shudder felt in every compartment. Another wave advanced inexorably from the west. There was always another wave.

"The 'Screaming Fifties,'" Captain Jellicic announced to no one in particular. "Christ pity a seaman."

His companion didn't answer, possibly because he hadn't heard him. He was inches shorter than the captain, a round man, overweight, but his face was angular and craggy, the jaw set. Michael Alden wore earphones, and he was listening intently. The ship pitched again, and a rogue wave caught her to roll her over until it seemed the bridge would go under water. Alden looked up in excitement. "Hold her steady, Captain! He's found something!"

"Here?" The captain curled his lip. "Bloody lot of good it'd do if you hit a strike here, Alden. 'Tis the worst place in the world!" He waved expansively at the grey waters. The sun was invisible above dark brooding clouds that filled the skies from horizon to horizon. To the west a line of dark waves approached in a stately march, endless waves with white tops. Wind screamed unceasinglythrough the tug's rigging until the sound became part of the universe itself.

"Come right a touch," said Alden.

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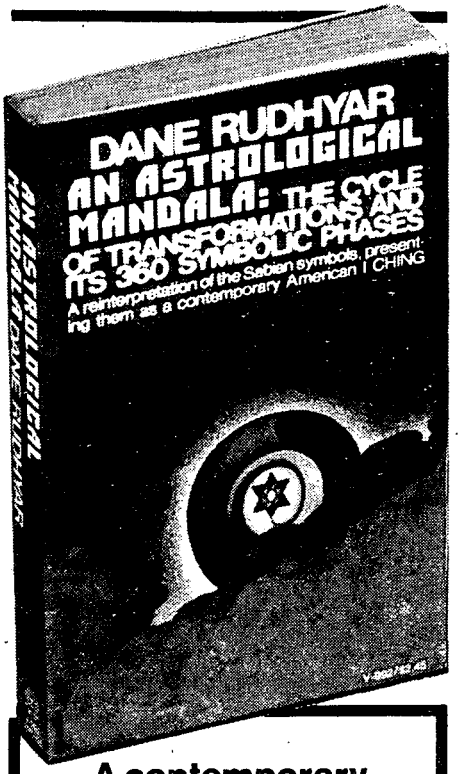
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Jellicic scowled, but barked orders to the helmsman. The ship moved across the face of a wave, presenting the angle of the bow to the white water on its top, and more sea broke across her decks. Spray crashed like hail against the bridge windows.

"Steady," Alden said. He lifted a microphone. "Position fix. As good as you can get it. This looks like it."

Microwave antennas on the mast made tiny movements. High-frequency signals winged upward, where they made contact with a navigation satellite, and information flashed downward. Again. And again.

Captain Jellicic released a collapsing chart table hinged against the bulkhead. When it folded down it nearly filled the bridge. He bent over it, scowling, and took a small instrument from a rack in the space the table had covered. He moved that about on the map, and his scowl darkened. He straightened to speak to Alden, but the engineer wasn't listening, and Jellicic impatiently poked the supercargo in the ribs. "We're *here*, ye daft fool! Look!"

Fifty-three degrees south latitude; the Falkland Islands were 700 miles almost due west, and another 400 miles that way lay the entrance to the Strait of Magellan. The nearest land was 250 miles south east of the point Jellicic indicated. South Georgia Island, good for nothing, and owned by the British.

"Not for nothing," Alden said.

Jellicic looked up, unaware that he'd been muttering. "Eh?"

Alden's face was grim. A tinge of green was visible around his cheekbones. "South Georgia. Not good for nothing. They render whales there. They're good for exterminating whales."

Jellicic shrugged. In his opinion anyone who sailed these Antarctic seas deserved whatever profit he could make, but Alden was a fanatic on that. There was no reasoning with him. "What have your lads found?" Jellicic asked.

"Mass concentrations. Veining down there. Thick veins. Manganese nodules on the deep floor. Veins in the sides of the crevasse. Just what we were looking for, Captain. And we've found it." He listened again for a moment. "Can you bring her about and over the same course again?"

Jellicic looked out at the crashing seas and thought of his little tug broad onto them. He pointed. Alden glanced up, then back at the chart. The captain shrugged and went back to the wheel. He wanted to be near the helm for this. As he watched the seas, waiting for a calm moment

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when he dared bring her around, he shook his head again. So they'd found metals. Copper, tin, gold perhaps. How could they bring anything up from 1400 fathoms below the Southern Seas? The discoveries were of no value. He looked back at Alden's grim features, and caught himself.

Perhaps they'd do it at that. But how?

It took Michael Alden two years. First he had to invent the technology to bring in mines for profit at 2000 feet below the stormiest seas on Earth; then he had to persuade investors to put their money in it.

Technology, he found, wasn't his problem. The investors were ready for that. Howard Hughes had been mining the seas for twenty years or more, and Hughes didn't risk money on vigia. Alden's techniques were new, but the concept wasn't, and he'd found the richest source of ores ever.

Economists waxed ecstatic over the potential markets: all of Latin America and most of southern Africa. The minerals would come from the sea onto boats — onto the cheapest form of bulk transportation known. Given the minerals, Latin America was a fertile field for industries. Labor was cheap, investment costs low, taxes lower. The United States had become a horrible place for risk investment, with its unpopular governments, powerful unions, bad schools, and confiscatory taxes. US investors were ready to move their capital.

It wasn't technology or economics that frightened investors away from Alden's mineral finds. It was politics.

Who owned the bottom of the sea?

Eventually ways to avoid the legal problems were found. They always are when enough money is at stake.

Ten years went by...

There was bright sunshine overhead and new powder beneath his skis. Mount Blanc rose above him, brilliant in the new-fallen stuff, untouched; and there weren't many people out. Superintendent Enoch Doyle released the tension on his poles and plunged forward, schussing down the fall line, waiting until he was moving dangerously fast before bringing his shoulders around in perfect form, turning again in a series of Christies, then back to the fall line, wedeln down with wagging hips. There was a mogul ahead, and he took it perfectly, lift, springiness in the knees — who said he'd forgotten and he ought to take it easy his first time out after so long behind a desk?

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He had just cleared the mogul when the beeper screeched insistently. "No!" Doyle shouted into rushing wind. He scrabbled at his parka, trying to find the off switch on the condemned thing, but he was moving too fast, it wasn't possible, and on he went, the enjoyment gone, past the turnoff to the high lift, around the logging road, through a narrow trail, now that was fun again and the hell with the bleep-bleep from under his parka.

Pole down, turn, turn again, cliff to his left, a long drop to doom, and Enoch laughed. The trail led to a steep bowl crowded with snow bunnies in tight trousers and tighter sweaters, gay colors against churned snow. Doyle threaded through them as fast as he dared. His wife was waiting outside the lodge. Enoch clipped a pole and mitt under one arm and used his free hand to turn off the bleeper.

She knew. He saw it as soon as he neared her. Her heart-shaped face, ringed with dark hair, incredible that she was so lovely and yet a grandmother twice now.

"They can't do this to you," she said. "It's your first vacation in four years. Tell them no. Enoch."

"Tell them no to what, *Liebchen?* What is it they want?"

"Oh," she said, her mouth perfect roundness, holding it for a moment. "They did not warn you? You must call them."

"You wanted me to say no," he reminded her.

"But first you must know what it is that you are to say no about," she said. Her accent was faint, but it always came through in her English. Her French and Italian had none at all, but Enoch was born on the Scottish border, and Erica would speak to her man in his own language. Always. As if his German were not as good as hers, and his French and Spanish better. He put an arm around her waist to steady himself as he bent with chilled fingers to release the safety bindings and martinets of the skis. He kept his arm around her as they went into the lodge.

It was too warm inside, he had overheated on the slopes, only his hands were cold. He caught the eye of the counterman and was let inside the manager's office, took a seat at the desk, and called.

"International Security Systems," a pleasant voice answered.

"Doyle reporting in."

"Oh. Ja, Herr Superintendent. A moment, bitte." The phone hummed and clicked. American telephones didn't do that, he thought sourly. Nothing else in America worked any more, except the telephones, but they always worked. Best in the world. An epitaph of pride. They had the best telephones in the world.

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"Van Hartmann," the phone said. "Doyle?"

"Ja, Herr Van Hartmann."

They spoke German by tacit consent. "The Argentine has boiled over," Van Hartmann said. "You must go there at once. Herr Alden has called five times."

"But the *residentes,*" Doyle protested. "And Chief Inspector Menderez..."

"Arrested. There is a military junta in the Argentine. Molina is out, on his way to Portugal. And all our people are arrested. There are Argentine soldiers and police in Santa Rosa. Herr Alden is not the only one upset. He has called his board, and they are calling us."

Doyle was silent for a moment. It was stuffy in the little office with its frosted windows. Erica was standing in the doorway, no secrets from his wife, none that he would talk of on a telephone anyway. He made a drinking motion, and she nodded and went out.

"I am not an Argentine specialist," Doyle said. "You would do better to send —"

"No. There is no one to send," Van Hartmann said flatly. "I will not plague you with the troubles our special-assignment teams have at this moment. Be assured that you are the senior man available." The harsh voice softened a trifle. "You would be within your rights to refuse this, but I ask you not to. It is important. Very important. The stockholders will be concerned."

Erica came into the office with a cold beer. Doyle took it and thanked her with his eyes, but his thoughts were far away. Finally he spoke into the phone. "Have they attempted to board Malvinas station?"

"Not yet."

Doyle drank the beer, a sip, then more, finally tilted back the glass and drained it. Then he sighed. "I will return to Zurich within four hours. Please have my people ready and arrange transportation. I will need the full briefing and the contracts."

"Danke. Danke schon," Van Hartmann said. "It will be done. Please before you go see me in my office."

The plane winged over the Atlantic. Doyle found a sheaf of computer printouts in his office behind the wing and began to read.

MALVINAS: DEEP SEA MINING AND REFINING STATION OPERATED BY OCEANIQUE INC. OF ZURICH. OCEANIQUE OWNERS OF RECORD ARE THREE MAJOR SWISS BANKS. SEE CLASSIFIED APPENDIX FOR STOCKHOLDERS.

MALVINAS IS LOCATED OVER THE MALVINAS TRENCH 1850 KILOMETERS

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EAST OF THE ARGENTINE COAST IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS. THE STATION IS UNIQUE AMONG OCEAN MINING OPERATIONS IN THAT THE ABOVE SURFACE INSTALLATIONS INCLUDING A WESTINGHOUSE - OERLIKON 50 MEGAWATT PRESSURIZED WATER REACTOR REST ON A CAPTURED ICEBERG. ICEBERGS ARE CHANGED AT INTERVALS DICTATED BY ECONOMIC FACTORS AND ARE GENERALLY 20 KILOMETERS LONG BY 2 TO 4 KILOMETERS WIDE.

THE PRINCIPAL PRODUCTS OF MALVINAS ARE COPPER, NICKEL, MANGANESE, AND GOLD. PRELIMINARY REFINING IS ACCOMPLISHED ON SITE USING FRESH WATER FROM THE ICEBERG. THE TOTAL VALUE OF REFINED ORES SHIPPED AMOUNTS TO 60 MILLION SWISS FRANCS OR $284 MILLION US ANNUALLY.

And I can remember when a dollar bought four francs, Doyle thought. And when "sound as a dollar" meant the opposite of what it does now.

MANGANESE COLLECTION IS CONVENTIONAL THROUGH SUBMERGING BARGES AND DREDGES. THE MAJOR COPPER AND NICKEL PRODUCTION COMES FROM MINING THE WALLS OF THE TRENCH ITSELF. THE PLATEAU DIVIDED BY THE TRENCH EXTENDS EASTWARDS FROM THE FALKLAND (OR MALVINAS) ISLANDS WITH DEPTHS RANGING FROM 300 TO 600 METERS. MINES AND STRIP MINING OPERATIONS TAKE PLACE FROM 350 TO 1000 METER DEPTHS. THE DEEPEST PART OF THE TRENCH WHERE MANGANESE NODULES ARE FOUND IS 4500 METERS.

THE FALKLAND PLATEAU IS CLAIMED BY BOTH UNITED KINGDOM AND ARGENTINA. THE UNITED KINGDOM HAS POSSESSION OF THE FALKLAND ISLANDS. DISPUTE OVER OWNERSHIP OF THOSE ISLANDS DATES TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND WAS FIRST PLACED BEFORE THE UN IN 1948.

And it's still there, Doyle thought. He reached for a beer. It'll be there when I'm dead. The plane winged on toward Brazil.

OCEANIQUE PAYS ROYALTIES TO BOTH ARGENTINA AND THE UNITED KINGDOM FOR EXPLOITATION RIGHTS TO THE TRENCH. THE PAYMENTS ARE SMALL AS THERE APPEARS TO BE NO POSSIBLE

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The plane reached the Brazilian coast as Enoch finished reading the summary and detailed attachments. The converted military transport landed in Recife for fuel and was on its way south again when the steward came into Doyle's crowded office space.

"Telefono, Superintendent. Zurich."

"Gracias." Enoch Doyle lifted the instrument. There was no vision screen. "Ja?"

"Van Hartmann. You cannot land in the Argentine, Herr Doyle. The new government is arresting all Intersecs people."

"I will divert the flight to Malvinas. Can you arrange for our reception there?"

"Ja. As we predicted, the Argentine is sending a warship to Malvinas. These men are not reasonable, Herr Doyle, and I must so inform the board when it meets this afternoon."

Doyle cursed in English. There were more satisfying languages for cursing, but he generally reverted to the speech of his youth when pressed that far. "I suppose you must, but I will ask you to please impress upon the stockholders' representatives that this matter may yet be settled to our satisfaction. Restrain them."

Van Hartmann paused. "I will try. Not much is known of the new government. A military junta has made a coup against General Molina. They have given the usual pledges of democratic elections and promised the usual reforms. Many of the reforms have to do with what they call ending the exploitation of their nation by international imperialist corporations. The directors will not care for this."

"No, I don't expect they will," Doyle said, but to himself. "What more do we know of the new government?"

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"We have not yet identified the strongest man among the junta, and they have not yet announced their new president. I will have the dossiers sent to your computer when they are assembled. The junta has requested recognition from all the major nations."

"We have taken the standard measures, one presumes?" Doyle asked dryly.

"Ja. There will be delays in recognition. We are also ready to bribe their diplomats if you think it required."

"I doubt it would do any good." Doyle thought for a moment. "South American nationalists place pride above all else. Their present diplomats will not be of their sympathies, of course, but the men they send to replace them may not be rational. I think it will be better if we merely assemble the dossiers."

"Ja. But do not forget, Herr Doyle, the directors will be anxious."

"I understand. I will report when I know more. I must now instruct my pilot to change course." Enoch Doyle laid the receiver in its hook and turned back to his briefing forms. He did not like this at all.

These contracts, he thought. Now useless. Perhaps they were not so fair to the Argentines as they might be, but without contracts and enforcement of them, how could there be business? Argentine patriotism was a very fine thing, but the new leaders must be made to understand that.

Once upon a time men evolved a system called International Law. For a short period it was taken very seriously. Until the end of the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, the Counsel for the Department of State was the second-ranking diplomatic official in America. International disputes had a decidedly legal air to them.

In general, only Great Powers could enforce international law, and then usually only against smaller powers; yet, oddly enough, the Great Powers took international law seriously among themselves. Legal disputes were cheaper than war. Scholars were paid large sums to prepare briefs quoting musty volumes of Grotius and Vattel, and phrases such as *pacta sunt servanda and clausula rebus sic standibus* were traded in the chanceries of Europe.

Diplomats debated questions of real as opposed to paper blockades. The Powers signed conventions for the treatment of prisoners of war, and even Adolf Hitler invited the International Red Cross to inspect his POW camps. As trustees of the international legal system, the Great Powers were far from perfect, but international law was often

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upheld.

The rattletrap system survived World War I, but when World War II began, all bets were off. In 1918 the United States of America went to war because German unrestricted submarine warfare was a violation of international law.

On December 8, 1941, the United States of America ordered her submarines to sink enemy merchant vessels without warning and wherever found.

By the 1960's, the authorities could write that peace was more important than law. Enforcement of international law was entrusted to the United Nations — whose Charter stated that no power could interfere in the internal affairs of another and made self-defense the *only* permitted reason for resorting to force.

A small country could seize the property of a Great Power, murder her citizens, defy every contract and convention, and the authorities would gravely pronounce that the Great Power had no right to take military action. The Powers could only sue before a court that could not enforce its judgments.

Pretty soon, nobody paid much attention to international law.

The runway was two kilometers long, but the iceberg lay northsouth nearly cross-winds; the landing was rough. Doyle had a brief glimpse of icy crags, and, incredibly, gaily clothed skiers winding down the sides of the ice toward a plastic lodge decorated as an Austrian castle. The plane taxied to a semicylindrical hangar, ugly in its functional simplicity, yet certainly more honest than the frilly trim of the ski lodge. There were a number of people waiting for Doyle and his team.

"Inspector Jiminez Ortega," the first man introduced himself. Enoch recognized the Intersecs chief agent at Malvinas. "And this is Mr. Michael Alden, the director here."

Doyle took Alden's extended hand. The American engineer had dark patches beneath his eyes, and his look was grim.

"Glad to see you, Superintendent," Alden said. "But I don't know what you're going to do. I've had three calls from the junta, all from a Colonel Ortiz, but he won't discuss anything except how fast we're willing to turn over the station and everything else to him. They won't negotiate."

Doyle smiled lazily. "We'll see." His face showed confidence he didn't feel as they went to Alden's office through cylindrical tunnels laid above the ice. The office complex was a cube of a building, held together by girders so that it could be moved as a single unit.

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Alden's office itself was sparsely furnished, with cellulose panel walls and steel furniture. Models of ocean craft and undersea vehicles filled shelving along one wall. Alden's desk was an old steel model with plenty of space for papers as well as the computer console. His drafting table was the latest model IBM; but next to it stood a wood table with T square, unchanged in forty years except for the small console bolted to one edge. A mounted sailfish hung over the table.

The wall opposite Alden's desk was covered with screens showing TV pictures of underwater mining operations. The waters were murky, with bright yellow lights illuminating the drownded world. At the edge of the illuminated area Doyle saw grotesque shapes, some motionless, some moving.

Disk-shaped subs darted about the sheer wall of the trench, which stretched upwards and down until there was no more light. Ledges had been cut into the convoluted sides of that infinite cliff, and enormous digging machines sliced out segments for vacuum dredge heads to suck up and carry away. Another screen showed the ores loaded into an underwater barge suspended by cables from something unseen above.

An inside shot of the barge showed pulverization and suspension-sorting machinery. Constant streams of muck spewed forth from the sorting barges to drift with the current, and a dark cloud settled slowly toward the invisible abyssal floor below.

Doyle felt a growing admiration for the American engineer who had built all this. "Doesn't that sediment give your manganese dredges some problems?" Enoch asked.

"Uh?" Alden glanced at the screen. "No. It settles too slowly, and there's a fast current." He grimaced slightly; that current made it difficult to anchor the iceberg. "We only dredge a few miles downwind of the berg. Seas get too high for the surface equipment outside the wind shadow. We let the refining discharges out near the surface — oddly enough, the stuff stimulates plankton blooms. Lots of fish. Sports fish, too."

"Umm. Oh. Thank you." Doyle accepted a drink Alden took from a cabinet next to his cluttered desk, and sniffed. Scotch. Alden would have heard that Enoch Doyle came from the Scots border country, but his deduction was wrong. Doyle hated Scotch and its iodine flavor.

"It seems you are operating," Enoch said.

"Sure. But where will I send the crews for rest-up?" Alden asked "The shift patterns are compli-

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cated, Superintendent. The underwater crews stay down there six weeks, then they get three off. Surface crews rotate by the week. They all have to live somewhere. Southern part of Chile's no good. Costs too much to send 'em to Uruguay or Brazil."

"So you need Santa Rosa. A pity."

"Yeah, that's what I thought when we put in the station. I wanted to be self-sufficient here. Couldn't do it. Installation got too big, human factors killed me. We keep finding more and more minerals and developing new capabilities for on-site processing, and that needs more workers." Alden's fingers played across the computer console, and pictures on the TV monitors changed to show grey crashing seas and bleak lead-grey skies. "How long can workmen put up with that?" The question was rhetorical, of course; Oceanique, like every other country, would long since have tested just what conditions would get maximum productivity at minimum cost. There weren't any labor unions in this business, and with a hundred nations clamoring for the hard currencies international corporations paid taxable workmen, there wouldn't be. Not real ones.

"We can't keep people here anyway," Alden said. "Logistics of feeding a big crew are just too expensive." The pictures changed again, to show a lavish casino, where couples in evening clothes played roulette, craps, blackjack, other games. A famous Canadian couple sang a duet in a bar furnished like 1928 America. "And yet we got tourists here. They don't stay too long, though. Go over to the mainland after a few days, but a lot of 'em come back every year. Jet set, idle rich. They like it. I can't imagine why."

"How long have you been here?" Doyle asked.

"Eight years." Alden shrugged and grinned lopsided. "Yeah. Well, I don't like it much either, but this operation's got me. Last minute technology. My own development budget. Where else are the resources to come from, Doyle? Everybody wants to live it up, but we used up all the resources. Ocean mining's the only way we can do anything about —" He stopped, embarrassed. "What the hell happened? You're supposed to have intelligence operations. You were supposed to warn us!"

"Obviously, someone failed," Doyle said. "Well. It is time to work. Can you call this Colonel Ortiz?"

"I can try. He'll keep us waiting to show how trivial we are and how important he is, of course."

Enoch shrugged. "We have

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time." Wasted time, which I could be spending on the Mount Blanc slopes with Erica. Wonder what it's like to ski an iceberg?

Colonel Ortiz wore formal uniform, with polished leather shoulder belt and pistol holder. He was a big man, with a thin clipped mustache, and he looked as much German as Latin. Doyle regarded him with satisfaction; at least Ortiz dressed like a gentleman. It might not make him easier to deal with, but it should be less unpleasant while they negotiated.

"You have spoken to your directors and are now ready to be reasonable?" Ortiz demanded.

"I have called to introduce a representative of the International Security Systems Company," Alden replied. "Colonel, I have the honor to present Superintendent Enoch Doyle."

Ortiz lip curled. "Intersecs." He said it with contempt. "I have nothing to say to you. Whatever arrangements we make with Senor Alden, you will have no further part to play. Your slave trading is finished."

"You refer to the men convicted under the contractual arrangements between Intersecs and your government?" Doyle asked.

"There are no contracts between Intersecs and my government!" Ortiz was shouting now. "The Dictator Molina purported to make such contracts, but they are void. We repudiate them all!"

"It is not so easy a matter as that, Colonel," Doyle said smoothly. "Surely your government does not yet appreciate how serious this is? Intersecs has guaranteed this contract. There is a great deal of money at stake. A very great deal."

"Money!" Ortiz visibly struggled to control himself. "You bleed us, and you enslave our people, and you speak of money! You would not know the word, Superintendent, but there is such a thing as honor, and it cannot be bought for money."

"I had always been persuaded that honor included keeping one's pledges, Colonel. But perhaps you are correct. Governments can afford honor. Businesses cannot. We have only contracts and agreements, and those must be kept."

The screen went blank. Alden looked up in alarm. "I told you. He won't talk to you."

"Yes, a very difficult man," Doyle said thoughtfully. "But perhaps something can be done."

"What? They won't even negotiate." Alden toyed nervously at a bald spot forming at the back of his head. "Superintendent Doyle—"

"Enoch. Call me Enoch, it's

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much simpler." Americans like to be on a first-name basis, he thought. Never did understand why.

"Enoch. And they call me Duke, usually. Enoch, this thing's just money to you, but it's been my whole life. Ever since I first realized just how thoroughly the United States raped this planet for minerals so we could have a few years of what we thought was prosperity, I've wanted to — well, to try to do something to make up for it." Alden spoke defiantly. "I think I have. And now it's coming apart. Nobody'll ever invest that kind of money in sea mining again."

"Then we'll just have to keep your station operating, won't we, Duke?" Doyle stood and moved toward the door. "No, no, I can find my own way. I'd best go to the Intersecs offices and use our computer. Zurich was to send me data you won't have. Cheer up, Duke. You're not stopped yet."

As he went through the rather dingy corridors, Enoch thought about Alden. Incomprehensible, like all Americans. The whole country seemed to have a collective guilt complex about its past successes. The world struggled after the impossible goal of obtaining a way of life that the Americans had achieved, while the Americans grimly hung onto what they had and covered themselves with self-reproach. Incomprehensible people, all of them.

Inspector Ortega was a small, wiry man, utterly unlike Doyle, but his eyes held the same hard look, and there was no humor in them despite the smile he attempted for his superior. Ortega's office was paneled in wood, and the computer consoles were out of sight, as were the wall screens. Ortega opened a small cabinet and produced cold beer.

"You have been studying my dossier," Enoch said as he took the glass. "Thank you."

"It is nothing." Ortega offered Doyle the desk, then sat at it when Enoch took a chair. "Superintendent, I do not understand. We had no warning. The chief inspector was on the mainland, and with all the Intersecs people he is under arrest. Why did he not know? Surely you had warning in Zurich. We have men in Buenos Aires —"

Enoch shrugged. "Had we known, General Molina would have known as well. The conspirators were shrewd. Excuse me a moment. I would like quiet, to think."

Enoch leaned back in his comfortable chair and wiggled his ears. There was no movement visible, but the motion activated his implant. A voice came into his head. "ON LINE. PLEASE GIVE

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YOUR CODE." It was a very impersonal voice.

Enoch formed words in his head, a letter at a time. It was slow work. First a code identity establishing himself as cleared for all Intersecs information. Then: "D-O-S-S-I-E-R-S"

"READY."

"I-N-S-P-E-C-T-O-R X-X J-I-M-I-N-E-Z X-X O-R-T-E-G-A"

"SUMMARY OR DETAIL INTERROGATIVE"

"S-U-M"

"ORTEGA, JIMINEZ. INSPECTOR SENIOR GRADE. NO SECURITY FAULTS. LAST LOYALTY REVIEW 34 DAYS AGO. MAY BE ENTRUSTED WITH ALL COMPANY INFORMATION BELOW LEVEL OF COSMIC. KNOWS IDENTITY OF MAJOR STOCKHOLDERS. FORMERLY CITIZEN OF MEXICO. RECRUITED INTERSECS AT AGE TWELVE. EDUCATED INTERSECS ACADEMY MADRID. LENGTH OF SERVICE EIGHTEEN YEARS ELEVEN MONTHS FOUR DAYS. SPECIALTY SERVICE COURSES —"

"SUFFICIENT. THANK YOU." Which is silly, Doyle thought. Being polite to a machine — but it was a difficult habit to break. The machines talked to him... "Inspector Ortega, would you please call Herr Van Hartmann in Zurich. I assume you have taken security measures with this office."

"Of course." Ortega lifted a telephone instrument and spoke a few short phrases. "What else, Superintendent?"

"Some information, please. How many convict laborers have we at this station?"

"One hundred forty-three, of whom twenty are in close confinement," Ortega answered immediately.

"And the total value owing by all of them?"

Ortega spoke with a distinct change in the pitch and timbre of his voice. "Delores. Information. Convict labor. Total current value of contracts at Malvinas station."

"EIGHTY-SEVEN THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED AND NINE FRANCS THIRTY-FOUR CENTIMES, DARLING," a wall panel said. The voice was a rich contralto, totally unlike the impersonal tones Doye had heard. Ortega looked embarrassed.

"I will change the voice, Superintendent. When I am alone I prefer —"

"No, no, make no changes," Enoch insisted. He grinned. "What crimes have we here?"

Ortega spoke to the computer again. The contralto voice replied, "THREE MURDERS. TWENTY-FOUR GRAND THEFT. ONE HUNDRED AND THREE PRO-

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PERTY DESTRUCTION DUE TO CARELESS OPERATION OF MACHINERY. TWENTY-THREE INJURY TO FELLOW WORKMEN. OF THE LATTER TWO CATEGORIES, EIGHTY-SIX ARE DUE TO ABUSE OF ALCOHOL OR DRUGS. DETAIL. SEVEN —"

"Sufficient. Thank you," Doyle said.

"YES, DEAR."

Ortega looked up, surprised. "I had not known Delores was keyed to your voice — ah." He looked closely at Doyle. "Implant."

"Of course. If you are ever promoted to superintendent, you will have one also. Not that they are as useful as is thought, but sometimes it is a great convenience. How many convict laborers on the mainland?" he asked in the tones recognized by office computers. There was no answer.

"Delores does not have the key-word program," Ortega explained. He translated: "Information. Santa Rosa. Convict labor. Total number and value of contracts."

"TWO HUNDRED FORTY-SEVEN CONVICTS. VALUE OF CONTRACTS SEVENTY THOUSAND FRANCS NINETY CENTIMES. ADDITIONAL. TOTAL VALUE OF CONTRACTS ON MAINLAND PROBABLE VALUE ZERO. SOMEBODY BLEW IT, DARLING."

"Your accountant has a sense of humor," Doyle said dryly. "It may get him in trouble someday."

"But a good man," Ortega said. "Are you ordering me to discipline him?"

"Good Lord, no! How you run this station is your business, and Chief Inspector Menderez' business, and perhaps Zurich's business, but it's certainly not mine." Enoch lifted his beer and drank deeply. There was a low buzz.

"ZURICH ON THE LINE, DARLING," the computer announced.

"Speaker," Enoch ordered. "Herr Hartmann? Superintendent Doyle here."

"Ja. Have you more information, Superintendent?"

"No. Have you information for me? We're secure here."

"There are strange developments, Superintendent. The Argentine junta is coming to terms with other companies. It is only with Oceanique that they threaten total confiscation."

"Hmm." Enoch slugged back more beer and thought about that. "Does Intersecs have contracts with other Argentine-based companies?"

"Only minor ventures, and none with enforcement clauses. They are not threatened, in any

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event."

"Curiouser and curiouser. So why Oceanique?"

"We do not know."

"I see. What have you got for me on the rebel government, then?"

There was a pause and a rustle of printout papers, then Van Hartmann's voice again. "The junta is composed of seven officers who have agreed to ignore their differences in rank. They have informed the Zurich office that all contracts with Intersecs are void, and there are no negotiations required. They will release our people when they please."

"Damned nice of them," Enoch said. Ortega muttered inaudible curses.

"Of the junta, two are vulnerable. A Colonel Mendoza has gambling debts and owes much money to Recreaction, S.A., as well as to others. The other, a General Rasmussen, has sexual appetites which would not appeal to his military associates. Colonel Mendoza is aware that we know of his problems and has privately assured us that he would be pleased to cooperate but cannot. The general does not know that we have any suspcisions. Of the others, we have nothing of importance, but our agents are looking."

"What about a Colonel Ortiz?" Doyle asked.

"Incorruptible. Superintendent, these dossiers have been relayed to Malvinas. It is not necessary to ask me about them."

"Sure, but it's easier this way. Have you got any suggestions about how we can get to Ortiz? He seems to be in charge of negotiations with Oceanique."

"Colonel Ortiz is thirty-four years old. He is an extreme patriot. Affiliated with Opus Dei and Catholic Action. Outspoken. He has always opposed any concessions to other nations or companies. He demands immediate high technology for his country and protests that only second-rate equipment is sold to the Argentine. General Molina had scheduled him for early retirement, but Ortiz is popular with his men and was thought to be necessary. I believe we recommended that Ortiz be given a diplomatic post abroad, but Molina did not act on it in time."

"I see. Incorruptible. A pity," Doyle said thoughtfully.

"Our associates have already marked him as dangerous," Van Hartmann said. "Should I inform them that Ortiz is a man beyond reason?" Van Hartmann was casual, as if he were discussing the falling price of manganese.

"No, please."

"The stockholders are extremely concerned," Van Hartmann said. His voice took on a

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note of warning. "The board has authorized you to take whatever measures may be required. You may request action by stockholder associates as you think best. They want immediate results."

"I understand," Enoch said quietly.

"Immediate results," Van Hartmann repeated. "It should not be necessary for you to call us again."

"Yes. A request, Herr Van Hartmann. It will be easier for you than me until I have placed new agents in Buenos Aires. Please have someone approach General Rasmussen and Colonel Mendoza to arrange for the junta to meet with me. Colonel Ortiz will not negotiate, and I cannot persuade them until they will talk to me. I would prefer that the request for a meeting come from them."

"It can be arranged," Van Hartmann said. "Anything more than that you must do yourself. Is that all?"

"Yes."

"The stockholders will expect to hear of results. Soon." The line went dead, and there was a long silence.

"I have known Colonel Ortiz," Inspector Ortega said. "He is a good man. It is a pity."

"Yes."

"I suppose there is no possibility of legal action? Eventually we might obtain compensation —"

"No." Doyle shook his head positively. "The security of the contracts between Oceanique and the Argentine was directly and absolutely guaranteed by Intersecs. If we let this outfit get away with confiscation of Santa Rosa, the whole structure of international trade will be affected. Contracts must be honored."

Ortega sighed. "I am a policeman. I suppose I might also be described as a soldier. I do not make company policy. But I cannot help but think that —"

"If you are wise you will not finish that sentence," Enoch said quietly. "Do you think there's a man among us who hasn't thought the same bloody thing? Do I have to give you the usual pep talk about international law enforcement?"

"No. Intellectually I am convinced. And I remain loyal. But I do not like it, Superintendent."

"None of us do. I've got a few hours before Zurich gets those buzzards to call me. Where can I get some skis?"

The slopes were not good, Enoch decided. The snow was artificial, and the slopes too gentle. He gave it up as a bad job, wondering why anyone would pay the prices the gaming and recreation concessionaires charged.

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It was just as well that he quit early, because the call from Buenos Aires came not long after he returned to Inspector Ortega's office.

The screen showed five officers in Argentine uniform. Doyle recognized Colonel Ortiz and was introduced to the others. Ortiz seemed to be the spokesman.

"My compatriots believe it would be useful to meet with you," Ortiz said without preliminaries. "I do not, but they have persuaded me to discuss it."

"Senor Colonel, are you familiar with the terms of the contracts your government has signed?" Doyle asked carefully. "Let me refresh your memories, senores. You have over twenty million gold francs on deposit in Zurich to back your currency. All of that is forfeit upon abrogation of our contracts. Surely this is a sufficient reason for negotiations? Argentina cannot be overly endowed with hard-currency reserves." Doyle knew to the centime what currencies were held by the central banks of Buenos Aires.

"We had written that off," Ortiz said. There was a buzz of conversation behind him. Evidently his colleagues hadn't. Ortiz turned to confer with them, then spoke to Doyle again. "When do you suggest we hold this meeting? We are willing to grant you safe conduct."

"I much regret that I cannot come to Buenos Aires," Enoch said carefully. "It is not that I do not trust your word, but we held contracts with the Argentine; yet my people are under arrest in your country at this moment. It would serve no useful purpose for me to join them."

Ortiz flushed and opened his mouth to shout, but he was interrupted by General Rasmussen. "We can understand that view, Superintendent Doyle. Yet surely you do not suggest that the ruling council of a sovereign nation should travel to an iceberg and confer with the representatives of a private company!"

A company with a bigger budget than a lot of nations, Doyle thought. But no matter. "Would Montevideo be convenient?"

General Rasmussen shrugged. "It is a matter of principle, Senor Doyle. It would not appear proper for us to come to you, even if we wished to do so. It would enrage our people..."

"We will not come to you," Ortiz said coldly. "We are the ruling council of the Argentine Republic. We do not travel to meet the lackeys of a corporation which exists on slavery."

"Then we are at an impasse already," Doyle said. "A pity. I think that when the news of your, ah, currency difficulties becomes widely known, there is very likely to

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be a loss of confidence in your peso. Widespread selling. A few million francs in gold is not so much, but these things always seem to snowball..."

"I see. You threaten us with economic war if we do not come to meet you. You would do that in any event, whether we meet or not," Ortiz said.

"A moment." The new man was tall and slender, and superficially resembled Ortiz. Colonel Mendoza. "If, perhaps, we released your colleagues as a gesture of good faith, would you then be willing to come here?"

Doyle smiled. That's round one, he thought. "Certainly, Colonel. You see, we are not so difficult to do business with..."

There were soldiers in the streets of Buenos Aires. Enoch saw them as an army staff car took him from the airport to the Casa Rosada. As they hustled him into the Presidential Palace, he barely had time to mark the contrasts on the Plaza del Mayo: palm trees and fountains, impressive Nineteenth Century granite buildings with air conditioners protruding from the windows, a Gothic cathedral. Between the old buildings were modern steel and glass structures; and there were tanks on the broad white walkways under the palm trees.

Enoch went first to the office of General Rasmussen. The general was stocky, built like a wedge, with thick meaty lips and dark eyes. He eyed Doyle warily. When the aides left the room, and Enoch had declined a drink, the general leaned forward confidentially. "You understand that I am in sympathy with your efforts, but that I do not control the council?" he asked anxiously.

"Certainly, General," Enoch said. "We appreciate your efforts. What I don't understand is, why have we been singled out? Your council isn't giving the other companies nearly this much trouble."

Rasmussen shrugged. "It is Colonel Ortiz," he said. "He is a maniac, Superintendent! No compromise. The holdings of Oceanique must be seized, and all contracts with Intersecs canceled. He is willing to release your people, but it was difficult to persuade him even that far."

"Hmm. And if his opposition ceased?"

"Then, I think, it would be well between us. He is the leader of Opus Dei, and that is three votes in the junta. But he will not be persuaded, Superintendent. It is not my fault. I have done the best I can for you; to go further would accomplish nothing except that I would be called a traitor to the revolution and a tool of the

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corporations..."

"We understand, General. We believe these contracts are in the interests of your country. It is gratifying to know that you share that belief. Certainly we will have disagreements, but we are both reasonable men..." The damn fool, Enoch thought. If Ortiz doesn't have this office bugged, *he's* a fool. Rasmussen was a nonpolitical official under Molina, put on the junta for national unity. But how did a creature like that get to be a general? "I suppose, then, that I should speak with Colonel Ortiz. Can I be taken to his office?"

"Certainly." Rasmussen rang for an orderly. "It has been pleasant to meet with you, Superintendent. And you will not forget that —"

"That you are a reasonable man. No, certainly not. Thank you, General."

Ortiz had offices directly across from the ornate presidential suite, and the president's offices were empty. Symbolic, Enoch thought. And dangerous. He was kept waiting in an anteroom.

"I-N-F-O-R-M-A-T-I-O-N" he thought.

"ON LINE."

"O-R-T-I-Z X-X J-E-S-U-S M-A-R-I-A X-X C-O-N-N-E-C-T-I-O-N-S W-I-T-H O-C-E-A-N-I-Q-U-E."

"NONE IN RECORDS."

"P-U-T M-Y A-S-S-I-S-T-A-N-T I-N T-H-E L-O-O-P"

"I'M ON, BOSS." The voice wasn't different, of course, but now Enoch could ask questions in normal language, and Timothy would program them into the computer — provided the Argentines didn't do something about his communications. Implant to Enoch's briefcase; briefcase to the aircraft he'd come in; aircraft to Zurich and Malvinas, via satellites; any of the lines were vulnerable to jamming. The codes were supposed to be unbreakable, though. He might be jammed, but he wouldn't be overheard. He hoped.

The office had been ornately furnished for one of General Molina's assistants, and Ortiz hadn't changed the decor. The colonel wore the same uniform as before, or a newly pressed copy of it. Neat, Enoch thought. Best description of him. Mustache seems to have been clipped one hair at a time. No religious memorabilia in evidence — is that normal for a Catholic Action type?

The dossier had been complete. Ortiz was intelligent, well educated, popular with his troops and the communities they'd been stationed in. He seemed to have an understanding of international economics. Intersecs consultants

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thought he'd be a stabilizing force and might be the best leader Argentina had come up with since before the multiple Peron regimes. Except for one point. He hated Intersecs.

"You saw General Rasmussen before you came to me. I am surprised. I had thought you would consult with Colonel Mendoza," Ortiz said. There was no trace of a smile.

"I do not comprehend, Colonel."

"We will pay his gambling debts, of course. Colonel Mendoza will be a very useful man when he no longer has reason to fear or love you. Now I must investigate General Rasmussen. You see, I am a realist, Superintendent Doyle."

Enoch showed no surprise, but his features were locked in a rigid mask. "Colonel Ortiz, why is this necessary? There is so little to negotiate. Your threat to seize Malvinas, for example. A bargaining point, but not one of consequence. I dealt with it before leaving Zurich. We simply pay higher royalties to the United Kingdom. The British lion is toothless, perhaps, but not so helpless that he cannot defend the Falkland Islands and their offshore sea bottom. A British cruiser will be at Malvinas before your warship can arrive."

Ortiz' eyes narrowed slightly. Then he shrugged. "I had not expected quite such prompt action. I had hoped to present England and the UN with *fait accompli.* Very well, you have taken one bargaining counter, but what will you do about Santa Rosa? That, Superintendent, is entirely an internal affair of the Argentine Republic."

"But conceded on lease to Oceanique," Doyle said. "At your former government's request, I remind you. You receive the taxes, but have no necessity to provide government. Not even to operate jails and prisons —"

"Yes. You enslave people —"

"We collect the economic costs of their crimes for the victims. And we permit them to work. They keep a portion of their wages, and if they have dependents another portion is sent to their families. To be frank, Senor Colonel, foreign technicians would not entrust themselves to General Molina's justice. Even the Argentine citizens who work for us prefer our justice to yours. Only the incorrigibles, those who will not work at all, would rather be in an Argentine prison."

"There will be changes in the Ministry of Justice," Ortiz said coldly.

"Your pardon, Colonel, but all that has been said before. Here and elsewhere, and many times."

Ortiz said nothing.

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"And what value is Santa Rosa to you?" Doyle asked. "You harm Oceanique, but do no good for your country. Without Santa Rosa, Malvinas cannot operate. Without Malvinas, you have problems obtaining minerals. Without low-cost minerals — how soon before Chrysler begins laying off auto workers in La Plata? Where will GE get the copper for the radios they make in Montevideo? Your neighbors will not be pleased to see Malvinas harmed, Senor Colonel. Uruguay and Chile need the products sold by Oceanique. You risk your whole economy, and for what?"

"Those contracts are not fair, Superintendent. Oceanique makes enormous profits, and we get none of them. Yet it is our people who work in those deathtrap undersea mines."

Doyle nodded. "The profits are high, but the risks were enormous. It took a great deal of capital, and in these days of high taxes, risk capital is always very careful. Nobody would finance Malvinas without the chances of high profit."

Ortiz made a gesture of dismissal. "These matters may be adjusted. But Intersecs will leave the Argentine, and immediately. There will be no more extra-territorial rights, as if our republic were composed of barbarians not fit to enforce its own laws against European technicians. Intersecs must go."

Enoch looked up with interest. "CONNECT ORTIZ TO INTERSECS."

"TRYING EVERYTHING, BOSS."

"Why do you dislike us so?" Doyle asked.

Ortiz sniffed coldly. "A private company with pretensions of sovereign rights. Company judges decide the fate of our people after company police arrest them for violation of company regulations. And you have the temerity to guarantee the pledged word of the Argentine Republic!"

"I do not wish to be impolite, Colonel, but the Argentine Republic is not keeping its word —"

"It was not the action of my people! General Molina made those pledges."

"Are they so unreasonable? There were, it is true, payments made in special form directly to the President of the Republic. Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me how those should be made in future?"

"You offer me bribes?"

"Of course not. But the payments were understood, if not part of the formal contracts, and your government should have them —"

"Get out," Ortiz said. "You and your slavers. Leave."

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"A-N-Y L-E-V-E-R O-N O-R-T-I-Z INTERROGATIVE"

"NOT A DAMN THING, BOSS."

"Colonel," Doyle said carefully. "I beg you to reconsider. To many corporations, Intersecs is their only guarantee of international contracts. Our guarantees are always enforced. A government cannot be sued in any court unless it wishes to be. It can always escape an agreement it no longer cares for, or defy an International Court award it does not like. Intersecs takes no part in the negotiation of contracts, and never guarantees any agreement unless asked by the governments concerned, but our guarantees are known to be reliable. You threaten more than the interests of Oceanique and your economy. You threaten the structure of international trade."

"Then it is time that rotten structure was destroyed. There is no place for such as you among sovereign governments. There is no more to discuss."

"A-N-Y-T-H-I-N-G A-T A-L-L INTERROGATIVE URGENT"

"NOTHING WE CAN USE"

Doyle stood slowly. He had been thoroughly searched before entering the Casa Rosada, of course, but even the best detection equipment cannot find a weapon whose nature is unsuspected. "I remind you, Colonel, that it is to the interest of every government that the great corporations believe contracts will be enforced. I am sorry we cannot act as reasonable men." Enoch looked casually around the room and fixed his attention on a wall plaque. "Very nice."

Ortiz looked around. As he did, Enoch's hands came together and applied pressure to his class ring. The stone fell out. The exposed part of the stone was hermetically sealed, as had been the backside until now. As he left the office, the volatile backside of the stone began to sublimate...

The plane winged across the Atlantic toward Zurich.

Another small scar on my conscience, Doyle thought. In the old days, gunboats might have bombarded Argentine ports, and marines landed to collect Argentine customs duties until all payments were satisfied. Certainly we are more *civilized* than in the old days....

The phone buzzed insistently. Enoch lifted it. "Superintendent Doyle."

"We found it, boss," his assistant said. "Trouble was, there were name changes involved. We had to feed Ortiz' fingerprints into the system. Here it goes. ORTIZ, JESUS MARIA, DEFINITELY IDENTIFIED AS JESUS MARIA

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RUIZ, ORPHAN AT SANTA YNEZ CONVENT BAHIA BLANCA. AT AGE TWELVE RUIZ APPLIED FOR ADMISSION TO INTERSECS ACADEMY. REJECTED, MARGINAL ACADEMIC TEST SCORES AND PSYCHO DOWNCHECK DIAGNOSIS RIGID PERSONALITY. REAPPLIED AGE SEVENTEEN REJECTED ACADEMIC TEST SCORES SATISFACTORY BUT PERSONALITY DIAGNOSIS UNCHANGED, ADD HOSTILITY TO INTERNATIONAL CORPORATIONS PARTICULARLY INTERNATIONAL CORPORATIONS PARTICULARLY INTERSEC. HOSTILITY WAS CONCEALED AND SUBJECT POSSIBLY UNAWARE AT CONSCIOUS LEVEL.

ENTERED ARMY AS JESUS MARIA ORTIZ PROMOTED SERGEANT POSTED TO MILITARY ACADEMY ARGENTINA. BACKGROUND RECORDS FALSIFIED, REASONS UNKNOWN. GRADUATED UPPER QUARTER OF CLASS NO OUTSTANDING HONORS.

EMPLOYEE MALVINAS STATION HERNANDO RUIZ NOW SERVING FIFTH YEAR OF NINE YEAR SENTENCE FOR DESTRUCTION OF COMPANY PROPERTY AND MANSLAUGHTER WHILE UNDER INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL DEFINITELY IDENTIFIED AS BROTHER OF JESUS MARIA RUIZ AKA ORTIZ."

"That's enough. Thank you," Enoch said. So it was there all the time. Personal hatred for Intersecs. With good reason. A twelve-year-old kid told he wasn't good enough to get citizenship with an international, he'd have to make do with the country he was born in. Tried again, rejected again. Then his brother jailed....

"Have somebody review the Hernando Ruiz case," Doyle said. "We owe him that much."

But it's too late for Jesus Maria Ortiz, Doyle thought. Perhaps I could have made a bargain with him if I'd known about his brother. Probably not. But Colonel Ortiz would already be in a mental hospital now, with all the symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia.

The drug was temporary, but the effects on Ortiz would be permanent. He'd never be trusted with authority again. "How's Van Hartmann doing with the junta?" Enoch asked.

"OK. We'll have to make a few concessions, but they'll bargain..."

"Right." Enoch Doyle gently replaced the phone. In a few hours he'd be in Zurich, and after that the slopes of Mount Blanc. His face was expressionless as he stared at the dark waters of the Atlantic far below.

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A short, tall tale about the Sonora Kid, whose rope would run out in three hours, hardly all the time in the world . . . at least in this one.

Thataway

by EDWARD WELLEN

Danged if the Sonora Kid didn't grin as he listened to the hangman spring the trap and drop the sandbag that weighed the same as the Sonora Kid. The fibers of the rope gave off a kind of mandrake-root screech. Over and over the hangman stretched the rope. Little by little the screech died.

Began to seem the sandbag was a kind of stalled pendulum and settled hourglass in one. But the Sonora Kid wasn't wasting the grains of sand remaining to him thinking gray thoughts. The Sonora Kid wasn't giving up till the last minute — and maybe not even then. He scratched with one of his spurs at the adobe holding the bars of the window while he kept his eyes skinned and his ears pricked. His features were handsome though scattered some, but watchful like this he looked more coyote than man. Though with his banty rooster frame and with his spur in his hand he looked more fighting cock than either.

The Sonora Kid hadn't figured to wind up this way. He had thought, if he had ever given it any thought, to sometime meet up with a faster gun, or with a slower one taking him from behind. But his rope had run out.

A short rope, but enough. Way back when, which means paring nine years from his twenty-one, he answered to the name Finis Tennant. That was a snot-nosed young 'un greenhorning in from the canyons of New York. He had taken to the West, and once he learned to handle a gun and found he had these natural-born reflexes that made no nevermind of his puny frame, he took the West — or as much of it as lay within gunshot of wherever he stood. He cut so many notches in his gun butt you could use it for a saw, each notch standing for a white man — others not counting.

But even in that short span the West had begun to change, to get law-bound. He paused in his

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scratching to try and shake the bar. No give at all. As he set to work again, his mind's eye pierced night and walls and distance. All that out there used to be open range. Now they were fencing it all in.

But while it lasted a range war paid a top gunhand well, if a feller knew when to change sides. That made enemies. But just being top gunhand drew enemies — glory hunters with not a lick of sense, only the itch to trigger their way to quick fame.

Though in the end it hadn't been a glory hunter that had caught up with the Sonora Kid. The law had caught up with him — not on the trail but in bed. The Sonora Kid's smile had the bite of shag tobacco. A good weight of woman, Rosa. When he sprang awake she had entwined him just long enough to hold him from grabbing his gun. Put him in mind of that *hombre* Samson in the Bible that got hisself signed, sealed, and Delilahed.

The sheriff made no bones about stooping to use a woman to get the Sonora Kid off guard.

"I'd a whole heap sooner try to braid a mule's tail in fly time than come up against the Sonora Kid in a fair fight."

The sheriff had seen to it, though, that the Sonora Kid got as fair a trial as the circumstances allowed and that were was no lynching.

Now, in less than three hours, the good citizens of Dry Gulch would gather around yonder gallows in the chill dawn. Not one of them had enough sand in his craw to whisper when the Sonora Kid walked by. But once the noose was around the neck of the Sonora Kid, you could just bet every last one of them would holler. And after, the good citizens of Dry Gulch, who took the side of the road when the Sonora Kid passed by, would take and divvy up the rope.

Quickly the Sonora Kid palmed his spur. Someone coming to make sure the Sonora Kid was still in his cell. Every now and then, never more than ten minutes between the then and the now, the sheriff or one of his deputies looked in on the Sonora Kid. This time the sheriff himself showed, with the stupider of the deputies at his off elbow. Without turning from the window the Sonora Kid caught both in the corner of his eye.

The deputy laughed.

"That's right, Kid. Get an eyeful of the moon. Last moon you'll ever see."

The sheriff's years were telling on him. He laced his fingers over his belly, holding himself in, but he gave his deputy the fisheye.

The deputy stepped away and busied himself unloading and reloading his shotgun.

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The sheriff came to the bars of the cell, but not too close.

"Like something to eat, Kid?"

The Sonora Kid shook his head.

"Thank you kindly, sheriff, all the same."

The last time the sheriff had looked in he had tossed the Sonora Kid the makings. Now the Sonora Kid did what he always did in a tight place. He let his face go slack and dreamy while he built a cigarette.

With a sigh the sheriff turned and left.

Right so the Sonora Kid went back to work. He held the spur so's to choke off the jingle. With his head cocked for listening and for letting the smoke miss his eyes, the Sonora Kid clawed away. Deeper down than the spur raked he knew it to be a hopeless task. But it gave him something to do.

One hour to go. He tried the bar in its socket. He remembered having teeth looser than that. He shook his head, blew adobe dust away from the socket, changed hands. Nothing to do but keep trying to the last.

The tail of his eye caught movement. While his mind froze, wondering how come someone to be sharing his cell without the squeaky door having opened, his reflexes started him turning.

In midturn his wind cut off, and he heard the galloping beat of his blood, and then with a twisting of his whole being he was out of his cell and out of his world. And near out of his mind.

He stood in the middle of a blazing day and a cowtown's main drag. He had no time to get any more bearings than that. An *hombre,* a glory-hunting young stranger, looking to need licking into shape but scowling mean and curving hand to slap leather, walked his shrunken pool of shadow down the street toward the Sonora Kid.

The Sonora Kid's throat went dry. He remembered the sheriff had locked his gun away. But then he grew aware of the familiar weight on his thigh. Though it seemed like no time had passed betwixt his leaving his cell and his finding himself here, there must have been a betwixt — time for someone to strap a gunbelt on him. He drew a blank on the time but knew he had not done the strapping-on himself. The touch of his right thumb told him the holster hung some higher than if he had done the strapping-on himself. He would have to allow for that.

He hunched his shoulders a bit but let his arms hang loose. He worked his hand, stiff and sore from digging with his spur, limber as a piano professor's. He cut his eyes quick left and right to make certain sure no one else was taking

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a hand in the glory hunter's bid. He like to froze. There was no one else, to take a hand or not.

The town was empty but for him and the glory hunter. No face at any window, no form hugging any doorway, no sound but the bootfalls coming nearer. A glory hunter just did not make his play without an audience. Yet this glory hunter, puff by puff of dust, step by shadow-pulling step, came toward him.

The Sonora Kid grimaced. He had never backed away yet from a fair fight and would not back away now but this showdown smelled all wrong.

The glory hunter stopped and took his stance. The Sonora Kid grimaced again. All wrong. The young feller, still in his teens by the unfinished look of him, stood broad instead of narrow, tight instead of loose, shifty instead of steady. The glory hunter made his move.

The boy's draw was so pitiful slow it like to paralyzed the Sonora Kid again. What had give the boy the notion he was ready to come up against a seasoned gunfighter — much less the Sonora Kid? But the Sonora Kid's reflexes had their own life. Before the stranger's .45 cleared leather, the Sonora Kid had plugged him twice. He spun as he fell.

There was still no one else around. With no witnesses to the shooting it would be only the Sonora Kid's word this was not murder but suicide. It was plumb loco. In any other town after a shootout the townsfolk would swarm out onto the street, look at the loser, and crowd around the winner. Then they would fill the saloons and themselves, talking into the night about this showdown and others they had seen or heard tell of. But this town was like no town he had ever been in. It was a town to quit pronto.

The Sonora Kid heard a nicker. There was a lone horse, bridled and saddled, in the alley next to the Last Chance Saloon. A strawberry roan that looked like it could show its heels to anything else on four legs.

From here the Sonora Kid could see the edge of town and a road running clear into a misty distance. The Sonora Kid looked around, picked up the reins, stroked the roan's withers, forked leather, and dusted out of town.

But though the road looked like it stretched forever, after a short spell it took him straight back into town. How that straight road took that strange twist and carried him back to the place he had left he couldn't for the life of him see.

What he did see was that whoever had brought him here wanted him to know there was no escape.

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As they drifted back into town the Sonora Kid let the roan have its head. It made for the alley alongside the Last Chance Saloon and halted. The Sonora Kid climbed down out of the saddle, dropped the reins. Still no one around but the still figure in the street. He walked toward the boy he had shot.

Before he reached the body it sat up, stood up, looked at him, dusted itself off, turned, and walked a dozen paces away into nothingness.

That's when the Sonora Kid thought what must've happened was they had hanged him and this was the afterlife the Bible thumpers hollered about. Maybe his mind had went blank or give way and he had missed out on all the business of getting led out of his cell, walking through the crowd, mounting the thirteen steps to the gallows platform, standing on the trap while they tied his hands behind his back and slipped the noose around his neck, listening to the sheriff read out the sentence. Let there be darkness. Had they asked him if he wanted a hood?

But this wasn't no hereafter. Loco as it was, it was another here and now. There were things about this place that didn't tally with what his senses told him. It seemed just a poky little town, one roughly like Dry Gulch. His eyes quickened as they picked out the bank, the sheriff's office, the saloon, the general store, the hotel, the barber shop, the freight office, the livery stable, the blacksmithy. But when he tried to step up off the street, he bumped into an unseen wall. And when you looked off either way along the main drag or at how the buildings slanted away, you found a queerness about the lines. Somehow you felt the town curved in upon itself.

Just as he was getting the lay of the land, the light went out in his mind.

When his mind lit up again, he stood in the middle of a blazing day and the main drag. The glory hunter, scowling mean and curving hand to slap leather, walked his shrunken pool of shadow down the street toward the Sonora Kid.

It had the same end.

The light went out in his mind.

When his mind lit up again...

It was always high noon here, leastways when the Sonora Kid was awake to it. It was always the same boy come back to life striding toward him, pushing the fight. It always had the same end.

His gun cleared leather long before the boy's, and all in one motion his thumb rocked the hammer and his trigger finger squeezed. The Sonora Kid varied his placement. Sometimes he went for the boy's heart, sometimes for

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the forehead or an eye. He held himself like steel against the kick and got off two shots to the boy's none. The gunsmoke seared his nostrils and stung his eyes. He liked breathing it, blinked tears of pleasure. Breathing meant he was still alive.

The boy should have been dead a thousand times over. The Sonora Kid could see the holes and the burns and the exploded flesh and bone and the blood. But the boy always picked himself up and dusted himself off and turned away and walked into nothingness and came back whole after another timeless spell of darkness for more of the same.

It was like someone had set the whole thing up for the one bit of playacting. The Sonora Kid studied some on it in the few instants he could steal to think each time he found himself standing in the middle of the blazing day. It made the flesh prickle at the back of his neck. But it plain had to be that. That's the only way he could size up what took place.

Some critter, human or heathen, had somehow lassoed him out of his own time and place. Not to save him from the rope but to have him play a part in this everlasting showdown.

What about the glory hunter? Had the critter snatched him too from some other time and place to play *his* part in the everlasting showdown? Or did the boy belong to this place and time? Something about him — not just the resurrecting — said he sure as shooting didn't belong to the Sonora Kid's. Likely it was the big bulge of brow and the fall away of jaw.

Speaking of jaws, the Sonora Kid thanked whoever had pulled this off, no matter what reason he had for pulling it off, for one thing — for bringing a mass thud of dropped jaws to Dry Gulch. The Sonora Kid laughed inside to think of the faces back home when they found the Sonora Kid had got plumb away.

He held hard to that thought as the sundowns flickered by. There was plenty worse things than doing over and over what he was best at. He could think of *one* worse thing — not being. If there was anything could take the shine out of that, it was wondering what kind of *hombre* was filling his boots back home. Whoever he might be he had got it by default. The Sonora Kid felt easy on that point: he could say without bragging on himself that no man living could beat his hand.

So there he was, alive — when he was turned on — but homesick. Whether home was up, down, across, or inside-out from here, he felt himself to be a long ways from home.

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Another thing, he had no way of telling whether this place ran on the same scale of time as home. No way except in his bones. He felt it ran a sight faster here, or rather in himself, for each time he blinked back on seemed to him he was some older. He *knew* his reflexes were slowly going.

The boy did not get all that better from showdown to showdown, but the Sonora Kid was shading him less and less each time.

If the Sonora Kid slowed up so much at last that he lost the draw, would the critter put *him* back together?

Whoever it was turning him on and off, treating him like a windup toy, the boss critter at least not only reloaded the Sonora Kid's gun betweentimes but fed him and trimmed his hair and shaved his face. Leastways, the Sonora Kid never felt the gripe of hunger, never felt the weight of shagginess, never felt the sprout of beard.

The Sonora Kid hated the thought of anyone seeing him when he was out, much less handling him, but there was nothing to spend his rage on but this boy that kept forcing the showdown on him. Maybe the Sonora Kid was lucky his only times of awareness were the few minutes of showdown when the need to narrow down on his rival squeezed out most everything else.

As the showdowns flickered by, he grew madder and madder at himself for drawing slower and slower and slower. He took it out in meanness, going for the boy's belly and groin. He had to watch out he didn't get too burning mad to see or shoot straight.

It was getting a nearer and nearer thing. These last few times the Sonora Kid again beat the glory hunter to the draw, of course, but the glory hunter was getting off one shot now instead of none.

In fact that very last time the one shot creased the Sonora Kid's shoulder. He had one thought as he blacked out. Next time might be his last for sure.

His mind lit up again. He stood in the middle of a blazing day and the main drag. The glory hunter, scowling mean, walked his shrunken pool of shadow down the street toward the Sonora Kid.

The Sonora Kid cut his eyes at the bank, the sheriff's office, the saloon, the general store, the hotel, the barber shop, the freight office, the livery stable, the blacksmithy — the whole empty shebang. He would miss even this.

Danged if the Sonora Kid didn't grin as he set himself right. He would not miss even this because he would be in no shape to miss anything.

Pride made the Sonora Kid wait for the glory hunter to make the

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first move. The glory hunter would never be a top gunhand. It was only the Sonora Kid's own blamed reflexes let the glory hunter seem to be beating the Sonora Kid to the draw at last. But the Sonora Kid wasn't giving up till the last instant — and maybe not even then. He pumped his hate and his love of life into his blood. He willed quickness into his stiff joints and worn muscles.

It would've been a showdown to see. But just then another figure stepped out of nothingness into the street.

This figure was dressed like nothing the Sonora Kid had ever set eyes on. The figure faced the boy, and the boy let his gun slide back into the holster. The figure faced the Sonora Kid, and now the Sonora Kid saw it was a she though she was bald. The Sonora Kid let his gun slide back into the holster.

The she faced the boy again and spoke. The sounds meant nothing to the Sonora Kid, but he heard the meanings in his mind.

"So this is what you've been up to. Now you put that right back where you found it!"

The boy looked sheepish up at the she and then down and nodded. He took something the size of a tobacco plug out of his hip pocket and let his fingers dance on it. The Sonora Kid blacked out.

His mind lit up again. He stood in the middle of his cell toward the end of night. He heard the sandbag drop one more time.

The Sonora Kid studied the sky. He reckoned it still lacked an hour to dawn. He pricked up his ears. Someone coming to make sure the Sonora Kid was still in his cell. The Sonora Kid's hand shot to his gun. It wasn't there. The gunbelt he wore for the showdowns was gone. He moved back in the shadow under the window.

It was the deputy he didn't like. The deputy held his shotgun ready and looked in. He made out the Sonora Kid and laughed in mock surprise.

"Still with us, Kid?"

The Sonora Kid waited till he had gone, laughing. Then the Sonora Kid bent stiffly and picked up his loose spur shining where it fell when the critter snatched him.

He scratched away steady at the adobe, changing hands as they tired. He scratched away with no hope but with no despair either. Then all at once, with a half hour to go to the hanging, he found the bar wasn't bedded as deep as he thought. He got it free all around at the base and scratched away faster to make a groove to swing it in. It took some sweating and straining, but he bent it out and up.

One bar out was plenty for someone the Sonora Kid's size. He pulled himself up and squeezed

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himself through. He couldn't help making some noise, though. It brought them running to the cell to see and then running out and around.

In the alley back of the jail they found a spry old feller hopping along on one leg. The other had give, he said, when the Sonora Kid dropped on top of him out of the window. He was a stranger in town, he said, come to see the hanging.

But from a vague likeness the old man bore to the Sonora Kid, the sheriff suspicioned the old man was kin to the Sonora Kid and had a hand in the Sonora Kid's escape. However, that was a thing the sheriff knew he could not prove.

The sheriff never gave a thought to this being the Sonora Kid himself. Even if you allowed it might happen for someone's hair to turn white overnight, what about the wrinkles only time could brand into a man? You could never in a million years take this dried-up old *hombre* for the Sonora Kid.

As it turned out, you couldn't take the Sonora Kid. Never saw hide nor hair of him after that. Guess he just went thataway.

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JOHN CLUTE

Books

Astounding: John W. Campbell Memorial Anthology, Harry Harrison, ed., Random House, $7.95

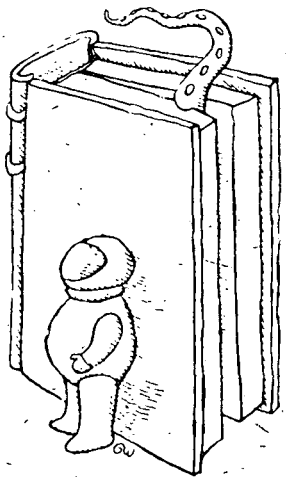
Conscience Interplanetary, Joseph Green, Doubleday, $5.95

The Hephaestus Plague, Thomas Page, Putnam's, $5.95

Mister Da V. and Other Stories, Kit Reed, Berkley, $.75

So long as John W. Campbell edited *Analog* you could still pretend it was *Astounding* in drag, at dusk with the light behind her, if you squinted, and you'd swear the old girl looked all of 1940 again, just as fit as she ever was in the great days when science fiction bootstrapped upwards from a swamp of pulp, Aphrodite reborn as Hugo. More virginal than ice she was. In the palmy prewar days when the genre could be defined as those prose fictions published under the name of science fiction in American pulp journals and ingested by a fandom, indeed it was Campbell who "blotted out the purple of pulp," as Isaac Asimov reminds us in his Introduction to *Astounding: John W. Campbell Memorial Anthology* (edited by Harry Harrison), and while he lived *Astounding* ghosted *Analog* with the legend of a moment in sub-literary history whose nature seemed apprehensible, under a rubric, to a chosen readership. A Golden Age is short.

During this Golden Age, Asimov goes on, "writers lifted the field from minor pulp to high art" under Campbell's influence, a claim possibly more muscular than litcritical, and aimed more at fans in the paddock than at those who happen to read prose fictions, some of them generic — but then what



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better place for eulogies to homesick dreams of life as a secret garden than the rather free-masonical anthology under review, comprising as it does thirteen newly-written stories in honor of Campbell and his universe, by old Campbell authors, carrying on old *Astounding* themes, stories and avoidance tropes in some of the old *Astounding* styles. Campbell's world was manipulable, positivist, tangible, solvable, a dream of mastery very much like America's then; Campbell's protagonists, like America's in 1940 before John Wayne glued on a wig and became a bellhop, were seen as equals of greater gumption, not victims, heroes not targets.

Neither Van Vogt nor Heinlein has contributed to the volume, nor does Asimov's offering of fiction, what is apparently his final Thiotimoline gag, do very much to commemorate the tone of his typical 40s work, even as self-parody with love, but otherwise the *Astounding* of that decade is respectfully homaged by several of its trademark authors. George O. Smith brings back his *Venus Equilateral* crew, to what must be deliberately comic effect, as Don Channing and Walter Franks, after hearing a lecture on the obsolescence of vacuum tubes, trot right off to invent a matter transmitter with the help of some of the new thingumajigs, like transistors; Clifford D. Simak closes off the *City* sequence with the departure of Jenkins for the stars at last, giving the author ample excuse (as though he ever needed it) to mourn a chunk of *temps perdu;* Hal Clement adds a clean, affectless pendant to *Mission of Gravity;* and Theodore Sturgeon renders the blurb (as they say) inoperative and vitiates the point of the anthology itself by showing up with an ancient coy blooper of a tale that Campbell *rejected* in 1939 for falling between stools, and it still does.

These stories and symptomatic gags all share a low creative heat (and a slight air of embarrassment) that seems to demonstrate how difficult it is for an author to recreate themes and modes he has cast off or has outgrown, but more to the point demonstrate how ineluctably the gates of Paradise have slammed shut on this particular Golden Age. *Astounding* can no longer flare into the mind its fluorescent Can-do, Captain. The icy euphoria in the Garden, when all seemed new to the eye, when that which exceeded your grasp was putty in your waldo's, has turned into literary and cultural fugue, a sign of terror at the corrosive, dying, genre-dissolving century — for any who try to hold on as maybe Campbell himself did, which is another topic. So the weakness of

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these stories could signalize maturity in those who wrote them, you might claim.

Most of the remaining contributions come from authors whose careers took off in the broader, shallower 50s, with *Astounding* a little past its prime, one magazine among others, but holding on, especially in the constant introduction of new series. Several of these are officially terminated in this volume. Poul Anderson shuts down his loose Polesotechnic League sequence with a dumpy and surprisingly disjointed story in which doubts are cast on the very episteme of robber-baron capitalism itself, though the issue remains in doubt for Mr. Anderson, and in which van Rijn shows his age at last; Gordon R. Dickson duplicates the theme, imagery, strategies and protagonist of "Warrior," an earlier episode in the Dorsai Cycle, with a re-run at twice the length (and you rather wonder what Campbell would have done to all that fatty tissue); Harry Harrison supplies a Pyrran jeu in his later, offhand, jokier style, a style which just might reflect a touch of boredom with dinAlt, di Griz, et Cet; Mack Reynolds concludes his El Hassan series with a return of the Dirty Dozen to die with a laugh episode, in which the children of the original corps ready themselves to carry on saving Africa, crying Can-do, Captain! at underdevelopment (and Africans); and the best story in the book comes from Cogswell and Thomas, involving a literal transmutation of the Imperial Space Marines: it might very well be the only contribution to this anthology that could have appeared, unaltered (though there is a sexual note or two), in Campbell's *Astounding*.

It's obviously anyone's guess what in fact Campbell would have made of these etiolated remembrances of an era he never visibly abandoned, except for the Sturgeon item, where he seems to have made himself clear. A speculation comes to mind, however, that he might well have evinced a certain editorial discomfort with these stories, because they are slack, and because the elegiac mode they share points to the contingent reality of that which it commemorates (but buries), and there seems no evidence to hand that Campbell ever thought of *Astounding* as a lucky contingency, or a moment of innocence out of the deflowered world beyond the gates.

Collectors will want the book for its series terminations.

Conscience Interplanetary by Joseph Green comprises a group of linked stories originally published in magazines and presumably recast, plus a coda written

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especially for the book to wrap up all the loose ends, all of which puts it very awkwardly, but as there isn't any decent critical term in the lexicon to designate linked stories originally published in magazines and presumably recast (plus coda), how else can you put it? Publishers usually call these things novels, but that's marketing not criticism.

As it stands, *Conscience Interplanetary* has more false climaxes than a tv-movie and the general effect of rapid transit through a railroad flat. However, its stories do more or less conform to an initial premise which, promisingly enough, utilizes the axiom that when two cultures of unequal technology meet, the weaker dissolves in shock, viz. Earth's larger moiety. *Conscience Interplanetary* translates this premise to the stars, in a period of human ascendancy.

In Green's dramatization of this premise, the Terran hegemony has created a corps elite of "Consciences," highly educated professionals whose task it is to judge on the intelligence of alien species, and to protect them if they made the grade. If they fail the IQ test, as in "The Butterflies of Beauty," their planet will be opened to the developers, for systemic concerns, problems of ecosystem disruption, lie outside a Conscience's brief, as does the general conflict (implied in the initial premise) between nature and mastery. In Green's universe, as in *Astounding's* so long ago, mastery over nature cannot genuinely be questioned.

In fact, when you look at the stories, it turns out that a Conscience seems to function mainly as a professional emcee, shoehorning his fellow Homo sapiens into a position where their exploitation of an alien world can be agreed to, by the aliens under threat, as in "The Decision-Makers," even though by Green's initial premise this agreement *inevitably* seals the fate of those aliens' culture.

The coda — tiredly written — makes much of a red-herring cloak-and-dagger conflict between the political party that supports the Consciences and its opposition, which calls itself the New Romans, and which plumps for unlimited exploitation of the stars. As the preceding stories have made it clear how very efficiently Conscience Odegaard (the protagonist) goes about satisfying any realistically imaginable technocratic lobby, the New Romans turn out to be a remarkably shabby straw horse, and a dishonesty within the fabric of this assembled book, for Conscience Odegaard, and his compliant female, are the true New Romans.

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A new writer, Thomas Page, comes halfway to writing an excellent catastrophe novel in *The Hephaestus Plague,* but breaks down on page 109, where Part 2 begins and so does lunacy. In Part 1, impregnable fire-igniting roaches, unearthed by a quake, invade first Georgia and then the rest of the American Atlantic seaboard while Professor Parmiter and a plausible array of scientists and organizations (including The Smithsonian Institution Center for Short-Lived Phenomena) try desperately to find a way to stop them, with eventual success.

But this brings us back to Part 2, where the Professor's researches into the mysteries surrounding his *Hephaestus parmitera* become still more obsessive and go literally underground, where he discovers in secret that the roaches, when bred and raised as a family unit (after some complex miscegenation), begin to exhibit telepathic qualities among themselves through the beads of bacteria formerly thought to serve solely as digestive organisms, and soon enough these family units are forming English words, Indian-file. En masse, these bacteria have a certain wisdom, it seems, and kind of remember the Flood. Eventually — the roaches feeling homesick and anyway beginning to burn the country down again — they all return to the hole in Georgia from which they erupted in the first place, Parmiter tagging along. Unfortunately, however, they leave him there, like the crippled boy of Hamelin, and the novel closes with obscure hints that someone may be haunting that hole in Georgia, perhaps (one is led to believe) the sad Professor, who was never easy with people.

Rather a shame, all in all — as the first half of the book is intelligently mapped out, suspenseful, and absorbing, especially in the detailed entomological investigations of the strange bugs, where the author's careful emplacement of Parmiter as an eccentric researcher *within* an activated scientific enterprise is both plausible and a great relief from that old genre shortcut, the scientist as solitary tinkerer.

So it's all the more unfortunate that Parmiter becomes just precisely that, down there in the cellar educating his telepathic metaroach.

Clearly it's old Leonardo da Vinci himself, there on the Berkley cover, head bowed gravely as he soars into space on his Renaissance wings, and clearly something pretty peculiar has happened to him, because the world into which he soars features spaceships, a green moon, a second green moon low on the horizon, and a turquoise sky in which stars are visible. It looks very

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much, and the jacket copy supports the supposition, as though *Mister Da V.* by Kit Reed, which this cover purports to illustrate, is going to be a far-flung adventure novel about Leonardo and how he was "yanked" into the near or maybe even distant future; and won't it be exciting to see how the great universal man of the Renaissance copes with spaceships!

But *Mister Da V.* is not a novel. It is a collection of stories, most of which are only marginally science fiction or fantasy. One of these stories is entitled "Mister da V." It is domestic fantasy (not adventure sf); it is set in the present (not the future); on Earth (and nowhere else); typically of Kit Reed's early vein, it is told from the viewpoint of the daughter of the janitor whose fantastical contraption (as it were magically) brings Leonardo to the present (and not, therefore, through Leonardo's own eyes, nor has he anything to do with the travelling through time). The burden of the tale is a rather sentimental rendering of the total uncomprehension with which the janitor handles the irruption into his narrow, limited life of an active genius, though for most of the text we don't see Leonardo at all — he's kept locked in an upstairs room.

All of this is perfectly clear. In no way does Kit Reed misrepresent her modest intentions. Any misrepresentation involved must remain with Berkley Books, whose decision to buy *Mister Da V.*, when their faith in what they were purchasing was so minimal, must stand as an intriguing puzzlement.

In her early stories, which *Mister Da V.* presents exclusively, Kit Reed works with considerable success to sensitize the formula-ridden domestic moralities commonly found in genre magazines of the 50s, in which protagonists tend to be victims, not terribly bright, often superannuated (or junior) members of bewildered family groupings (twins pop up rather often), and in which actions, almost any actions at all, tend to be treated as punishable hubris. Sometimes her efforts have a taming effect; "To be Taken in a Strange Country" fatally softens Shirley Jackson. Some of the stories read as finger exercises for later, more ambitious efforts. More often, though, as in "Judas Bomb," she avoids the pathos traps that accompany any attempt to humanize this mode of the domestic exemplary, and you hear the genuine voice of human beings caught in a world whose seeming indifference cloaks malice. Berkley's advertising savants should have stuck to that.

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From England's Robert Aickman: a totally engrossing and chilling look into the nature of time . . . and clocks.

The Clock Watcher

by ROBERT AICKMAN

Now that it has all come to an end, so that even the police are "making enquiries," I am trying to keep myself occupied for a little by writing out a story that no one will ever believe. Or no one just yet. Possibly some new Einstein will come to my rescue, sooner or later, and prove by theory what I have learned by experience. That sort of theory is thought up about every second year nowadays, though none of the theories make much difference to ordinary people's lives.

Perhaps I never was quite an ordinary person, after all. Perhaps I ceased being ordinary when I married Ursula. Certainly they all said so; said I hadn't thought what it implied, even that I had gone a bit round the bend during the last part of the war. But when it comes to the point, not many people bother very much about whom a *man* marries, though it can still be different when it is the case of a girl. And, of course, I had no parents by then.

Will anyone ever read this but me? Well, yes, perhaps they may. So I had better mention what happened to my parents and remember to put in a word or two about other things like that. My father fell from the top of one of his buildings when I was four years old. Of course it was a dreadful thing to happen, but I was never what is called close to my father, or so it has seemed to me since, and my mother would not let me even go to the funeral, said it would be too morbid an experience for a young child, and left me locked in the bedroom when the procession left the house. Not that you could really call it a procession, I imagine. Especially as it was simply teeming with rain. But possibly I exaggerate that aspect of it as children are apt to do. My mother died during the

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war I was engaged in fighting. There was nothing unusual about her death. Every second person seems to die as she did, I regret to say.

So, despite a certain amount of chat, some of it fairly hostile, I was pretty much on my own at the time of my marriage, though I had managed to struggle back into my profession and had a very fair job, all things considered, as a draftsman with Rosenberg and Newton. I had better explain that too.

Old Jacob Rosenberg had been a friend of my father's, so much so that he went on keeping an eye on my mother until his own death about a year before hers. (He dropped dead on one of the platforms at Green Park underground station, which is just the way that I myself should choose to go). His son, young Jacob, gave me a place in the office after I came back from destroying the Nazis. Of course, the Jews are like that: once a friend, always a friend, if you go on treating them properly. I cannot help saying it was where the Nazis went wrong. There was a great deal to be said in favor of the Nazis, of course, in many other ways. The Germans wouldn't have fought so hard and long, if it hadn't been so quite unbelievable, actually.

Rosenberg and Newton called themselves architects, but they were really something more speculative than that, more like businessmen with a good knowledge of construction. Not that they were not on the architectural register. Of course they were. Nor that their methods were not completely clean and honest. I saw enough of what went on to be quite sure about that, or I should not have stayed, however badly I needed a job, as I certainly did when mother proved to have left almost nothing. I think she had expected something appreciable from Mr. Rosenberg's will, but all she got was — of all things — a clock. A *clock*. Well, the police will find the pieces of it buried in the garden, if they care to dig ....

I had learned a lot from Rosenberg and Newton before I left them to set up in a similar line of business on my own, though far more modestly, needless to say. I have been on my own for nearly three years, not very long, but my name has become quite well thought of in this extremely prosperous suburb where so many appalling, unbelievable things have been happening to me, without anyone really knowing, though not without some observing — what there was to be observed. And, even there, it is not altogether a case of so *many* things happening. There is only *one* thing really: *one* thing that is capable of indefinite extension.

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I am a quiet sort of person, really. They say that you won't succeed in business unless you make friends fairly readily, especially in the property business. Myself, I don't know about that. I have acquaintances, of course, many of them, but Ursula and I hardly went in for friends at all. We didn't need them. I had always been rather like that, and now we were wrapped up in one another and thought that third parties would only spoil things. I know that was how I felt; and, as a matter of fact, I *know* it was how she felt also. And it never seemed to stand in the way of business success, well, quite enough success to satisfy *me*. I never wanted to be so successful that I should see less of Ursula, and I simply cannot understand all those Rotary Clubs and Round Tables and Elks and Optimists, though I might have felt it right to join the British Legion, if the British Legion had been what it was after the first war. All the same, I like to dress smartly, and that *is* good for business, whatever they say. I hated the state one got into during the war. But then, though I have certain views of my own, I hated the war altogether. God, it was ghastly!

I first set eyes on Ursula when she was sitting on a bank by the roadside, somewhere near Monchen-Gladbach. I cannot say *exactly* where it was. As a matter of fact, we actually went back some years later to look for the place and could not find it at all. Not that I wish to suggest there was anything peculiar about that, or anything related to what was already very much happening — elsewhere. It was simply that the whole face of Germany had changed by that time, and thank God for it.

When I originally spotted Ursula, there was no traffic on the roads; first, because all the vehicles had been destroyed or commandeered; second, because in that area there were no roads that remained passable except by military stuff, tanks and jeeps. There were no people about either, local people, I mean. Of course it was nothing like the Somme and the Aisne twenty-five years earlier, nothing at all. It was perhaps more depressing than horrifying, anyway at a first look. The Second World War was just over, and some of those whom I knew — not well, as I say — had the pleasant job of routing out the local concentration camp.

Ursula, mercifully, had nothing to do with that. She came from the Black Forest, hundreds of miles to the south. She was an only child and had lost both her parents when Freudenstadt was removed from the face of the earth. She herself had been working nearby as a

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domestic servant right through the latter part of the war. This seems strange to us, but Germany never really got round to "total war" and all that, although people here think that she did. Of course, Ursula was not properly a domestic servant. She was simply allowed to masquerade as one by the people who lived in one of the big houses and who, like many of their kind, didn't care for the Nazis. Ursula's father was a manufacturer of Black Forest souvenirs, and, Ursula told me, no one interfered very much with that either, until the very last months of the war. I describe him as a "manufacturer" because he seems to have been in a quite big way of business, with many employees and an agreeable income. Certainly, Ursula went to a costlier school than I did, and she also emerged better educated, Nazis or no Nazis. Though I went to a public school, and a quite well-known one, it was not Eton, and the field is one where the descent from the best is steep. More than anything else, Ursula's father manufactured clocks — cuckoo clocks, painted clocks, and huge clocks in dark spiky wood or in polished spiky metal that chimed and struck and kept tabs on the phases of the moon, not to say the zodiac. I can be specific because Ursula brought many such clocks into our home, in memory of her father, or otherwise. It was the downfall and ruin of her beauty and of our love.

And how beautiful she was when my eyes first lighted upon her! Her parents being Catholics, she had been named after St. Ursula of Cologne, who went on the long voyage and was ultimately martyred with all her virgins, hundreds of them, I believe; and a saint is precisely what my girl looked like — then and for a long time afterwards. She had a gentle, trusting gaze, despite everything that had happened to her, and a mouth like a soft flower at the most perfect moment of its blooming. She was still wearing the maid's black dress which had been part of her disguise, so to speak; and, again, many people will be surprised to hear that it was made of real silk. Even the fact that this dress was slightly torn and slightly dirty added to the effect she gave of having something to do with religion. She had no property of any kind, apart from a handkerchief. That was made of silk too, but this time it was a survival from her first communion. It was very small, but it had a wide edging of lace, made — yes — by the Black Forest nuns. Later, she gave me the handkerchief as a treasure to keep. I kissed it and hid it away, but though it seems incredible, especially to me, I realized in no time that I had

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managed to lose it. Of course it must be somewhere in the house now, and I never mentioned the loss to Ursula. At the time I first saw Ursula, she was weeping into this tiny handkerchief, and I lent her a much larger one, just as the kind man does in a novel or a show. I was awaiting "repatriation" at the time and had managed to evade any particular duties now that the destruction was over. No one who missed seeing what we did to Germany can have any idea, and the Germans put it all back in no time — Freudenstadt, as it happens, first of all, or just about.

I took Ursula under my wing at once; right close under it. It was what one did at that time, but, from the very first, I meant more by it than did most of the others, and when difficulty arose about Ursula coming to England, I had no doubt in my heart about assuring the authorities in writing that she was coming to marry me.

I hadn't seen her for more than three months and I went to Harwich to meet her. Little Attlee had come into power by then, and many of my acquaintances had voted for him, especially, as we all know, those who had been fighting under Churchill. England had started on her long soft greyness, but when Ursula emerged from her grilling by the Aliens Department, she was startlingly well turned out and accompanied by an unexpected quantity of brand new luggage. She told me that she had managed to avoid "relief agencies" of all kinds and had always been in a real job of some sort. Ironically, it was a bit different here. Though we all know how run-down England was at that time, Ursula was not permitted to take a job at all until after we were married and she had become a British citizen, so that at first she was reduced to working free of charge for a charity. It sent bundles somewhere or other, and, as in Germany, it was amazing how much had remained in back rooms with which to stuff them.

When Ursula arrived, I was back to living in my mother's and father's old house, and there was nothing to do but take her there. I was with Rosenberg and Newton by then, and young Jacob Rosenberg knew all about it and was very kind and decent. Certain others were not; and, oddly enough, when I made it clear that I was about to marry Ursula, they seemed not in the least reassured, but rather the contrary, as I have said. There was even talk of my having brought over a foreign mouth to feed. No doubt it was called a Nazi mouth when I was not actually listening. Of course it is unconventional for the bridegroom to lead the bride from his own front door.

In my mother's house, Ursula

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set up the first of her clocks. I had noticed that her shiny baggage at Harwich included a black, oblong box in what looked like leather but was, in fact, a good imitation of leather. The clock inside was a cuckoo, fairly large and in plain dark wood. The bird, which was paler, emitted a sharp, strident shriek, which could be heard at the hour all over the house. At the quarters, including the half, the bird was silent, and so at first I reflected that things might be worse. I was working hard both with Rosenberg and Newton (I abominate those who take money without even attempting to give a proper return for it) and also with finishing off the house before putting it up for sale, so that I could sleep like a log even with the cuckoo clock in the same room.

But before long the woman next door came in with a complaint about it. She refused to "discuss the matter" with Ursula and insisted upon seeing me. She was quite young, with blonde shoulder-length hair turned outward at the ends, and nice legs. Indeed, she was a nice person altogether, I thought. She said, quite agreeably, that the cuckoo kept her three little boys awake all night. "It doesn't sound like a *cuckoo*, at all," I remember her saying. I couldn't disagree but replied that clock cuckoos seldom do, which is, surely, true enough? I said I would speak to Ursula about it, and even at that early stage, so to say, I thought I detected a gleam of skepticism in the woman's eye, though a skepticism that was not unfriendly to *me*. "I'll do what I can," I concluded, and the woman smiled very nicely and attempted no further argument. I was rather shocked to realize that the wretched cuckoo could be heard at all outside the house.

Ursula did not enter into the spirit of what was, after all, a typically British situation. On the contrary, when I raised the question, in as offhand a manner as I could manage, she became tense, which with her was unusual; and when I suggested that the cuckoo might be silenced at least during the night, bedded down in the nest, as it were, she cried out, "That would be fatal."

I was at the same time astonished — and yet not astonished. I have to leave it at that.

"We could easily have someone in to make the necessary adjustment," I said mildly, though, I suppose, with some pressure behind the words.

"No one may touch my clocks except the person I bring," she replied. Those were her exact words, very faintly foreign in form, though by now Ursula spoke English pretty well, having im-

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proved her knowledge of it with a speed that amazed me.

"Your *clocks,* darling?" I queried smiling at her. Of course I knew of only one.

She did not answer me but said, "That woman with her hair and legs! What business of hers is our life?" It was curious how Ursula specified the very points that I myself, as a man, had noticed about our neighbor. I was often aware of Ursula's extraordinary insight; sometimes it was almost telepathic.

Even then, however, it seemed to me that Ursula was more frightened than aggressive, let alone jealous, as other women would have been. I reflected that a foreigner might well be upset by a complaint from a neighbor and uncertain how to deal with it. Already, Ursula was smiling through her sulkiness and telling me that even the sulks were assumed. All the same, it was obvious that there was a reality somewhere in all this.

Ursula duly did precisely nothing about the shrieking, nocturnal cuckoo. But shortly after the approach by our glamorous neighbor, Ursula and I married and moved on.

The wedding took place, of necessity, in the local Catholic church, and I admit that it was one of the most unnerving experiences I had by then been through, war or no war. The keen young priest was bitterly antogonistic and, at the actual ceremony, kept his burning eyes fixed upon me at every moment the ritual left possible, as if he hoped to sear me into "conversion" there and then, or, alternatively, to scorch and dissolve me from the backbone outwards. And, of course, in those day I had to sign a declaration that all our children would be raised in the Catholic faith. (And quite right too from the Catholic point of view.)

Ursula, moreover, seemed different — very different. This was territory that was hers, and not mine, and more, of course, than just territory. I am sure she tried to bring me in too, but there was nothing really possible for her to do about that. Earlier she had been upset when I refused in advance to wear a wedding ring in ordinary life, as it were, in the way the continentals do. But there was nothing for me to do about that either.

Most weddings are matters of equal gain and loss. It is not the wedding, that counts, though so many girls think it is. Weddings are, at the best, neutral. Seldom are they even fully volitional.

But I should say at once, very clearly, that Ursula and I were happy, incredibly happy. It would not be sensible to expect happiness

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like that to last, and I now see that I stopped expecting any such thing a long time ago. Our happiness was not of this adult world, where happiness is only a theory. Ursula and I were happy in the way of happy children. What could we expect, then? But other kinds of happiness are merely resignation, and often abject defeat.

People couldn't at that period go abroad for their honeymoons, and so Ursula and I went to Windermere and Ullswater. They seemed more suitable than Bournemouth or than even Kipling's South Downs, by now under crops. Ursula excelled me without difficulty in swimming, sailing, and fell-walking alike. Marriage had sheered off the first edge of romance from our actual caresses, but there was a sweet affection between us, as between a devoted brother and a devoted sister, though I suppose that is not an approved way of putting it. I always wanted a sister, and never more than at this present moment.

Our nights were certainly quieter without the noisy clock, though Ursula had brought with her a small substitute. It did not work on the cuckoo principle, and indeed neither chimed nor struck in any way. Even its tick was so muted as to be inaudible. None the less, it was in appearance a peasant object, brightly painted — in the modern world, still very much a souvenir. Ursula said that she had merely seen it in a shop window and "been unable to resist it." I wondered at the time from whom she had learned that always slightly sinister phrase, and I fear that I also wondered, even at the time, whether her story was strictly true. This sounds a horrible thing to say, but later it emerged that something horrible indeed was all around us, however difficult to define. I imagine that the little clock that accompanied us on our honeymoon had been constructed by the insertion of a very subtle and sophisticated mechanism into a more or less intentionally crude and commercial case. It purred like a slinky pussy, and when, later, I clubbed it to shards, I daresay I destroyed more than a hundred pounds of purchase money.

One curious thing I noticed on the honeymoon. I may perhaps have *noticed* it earlier, but I am very sure that it was on our honeymoon that I spoke about it. This was that for all her obvious interest in clocks, Ursula never had the least idea of the time.

We were sitting by the water near Lowwood, and dusk was coming on.

"It's growing very dark," said my Ursula, in her precise way. "Is there a storm coming?"

"It's getting dark because it's

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nearly seven o'clock," I replied. This was in April.

She turned quite panicky. "I thought it was only about three."

This was absurd, because we had not even reached the waterside until well after that. But we had been much occupied while we had been sitting and lying there, so that, after thinking for a moment, all I said was, "You need a watch, my darling. I'll buy you one for your birthday."

She answered not a word, but now looked angry as well as frightened. I remembered at once that I had made a mistake. I had learned the previous year that Ursula disliked her birthday being even mentioned, young though she was, let alone being celebrated, however quietly. I had, of course, without thinking, used a form of words common when the idea of a present arises.

"Sorry, darling," I said. "I'll give you a watch some other time." Oh, that word "time."

"I don't want a watch." She spoke so low that I could hardly hear her. "I can't wear a watch."

I *think* that was what she said, but she might have said, "I can't bear a watch." I was uncertain at the time, but I made no enquiry. If it was a matter of *wearing* a watch, we all know that there are people who cannot. My own father's elder brother, my Uncle Allardyce, is one of them, for example.

In any case, the whole thing was getting out of proportion, not to say out of control. Endeavoring to make the best of my mistake, I kept my mouth shut, tried to smile, and gently took Ursula's hand.

Her hands were particularly small and soft. They always fascinated and delighted me. But now the hand that I took hold of was not merely cold, but like a tight bag of wet ice.

"Darling!"

I could not help almost crying out, nor, I fear, could I help dropping her hand. I was completely at a loss for the proper thing to do next, as if something altogether unprecedented had happened.

She sat there, rather huddled, and then she gazed up at me, so sweetly, so lovingly, and so helplessly.

I sprang to my feet. "Get up," I cried, in my brotherly way — or the way I always thought of as brotherly. I lifted her onto her legs, pulled her not by the hands but by the shoulders, which was always easy, as she was so petite in every way. "Get up, get up. We must run back. We must run."

And run we did, without a word of comment or argument from her, though not all the way, or anything like it, because we were staying about a couple of miles off in a sort

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of apartment house owned by a retired schoolteacher named Mrs. Ardale.

In theory, I could have afforded something rather better, but the big hotels were either out of action just then or in some way unsuitable. In the end, I had just gone to the post office and enquired, and they had told me about Mrs. Ardale at once. It seems a queer way to organize a honeymoon, especially when we are supposed to have only one honeymoon in each lifetime, but Ursula and I were like that from the first — and for some time still lying ahead. In any case, between us the idea of a honeymoon was a bit of a joke, as it often is in these times, but, for Ursula and me, a tender joke, which is perhaps *not* so usual. Mrs. Ardale, by the way, was a divorcee, unlikely though that seems. She never stopped mentioning the fact. She also wore a very obvious chestnutty wig, though Ursula said her own hair was perfectly all right when one was permitted to catch a glimpse of it. I never took to Mrs. Ardale, but she certainly kept the place very clean, which was important to Ursula, and food at that time was much of a muchness everywhere, or, rather, little of a littleness. Mrs. Ardale used to serve us crabs caught in the lake. Not every day, of course.

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Later, we moved on to a less satisfactory place, high above Ullswater. It was a bit of a shack in every way, but, fortunately, Ursula seemed not to mind much, possibly because she was now really getting into her athletic stride, small though she was. She was often a long way ahead of me at the crest of the fell, and she could swim like one of those slender swift fish that never seem to undulate (or are they really fish?). But it was when we hired a dinghy and went sailing that I felt almost embarrassed by my uselessness and general ineptitude. Ursula always *looked* so competent, and she always seemed to have exactly the right clothes for whatever we were doing, simple though they were. I myself both look and feel better in business clothes — clothes for ordinary life in town. But I reflected that the hire dinghies could hardly be at their best from a handling point of view after five years of total war and with no tackle yet available for repairing them; and, in any case, I have never seen myself as any kind of sportsman, nor has my health seemed to suffer from it. I liked my darling to be so spry and agile when we were on holiday today. I never minded in the least being shown up by her, though many would have said it would be bad from a business point of view. But at the time it could hardly have mattered, as I was still with Rosenberg and

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Newton, and not yet self-employed.

Which, needless to say, was why, when we settled down again, we started buying a house in the same suburb, the place where I had always lived. Also, old Newton, young Jacob's partner from his father's time, was able to help us a lot there, not only with getting a really good mortgage, but with getting a really good house too, and quite reasonably cheap, as he was in a position to put a little quiet pressure on the man who was selling. The property business is full of aspects like that, and it is useless to deny it. It always has been, and doubtless it always will be, until we mostly become cave dwellers again, which may be soon. It was a remarkably good thing to have old Newton behind one when one was looking for a suburban house about twelve months after the Second World War, especially as he was in local politics, which the Rosenbergs, father and son, always made a point of avoiding.

But Ursula would have done well in one of those caves. I could imagine her, small though she was, in a bearskin, and nothing much else, and coping with all that might arise far better than I can cope with even a luxury hotel, and terribly sweet and attractive all the time, often unbearably so. As it was, she settled down as if she had lived in this steady-as-she-goes suburb all her life. *This* suburb. *This* house. We had given more than three weeks to our honeymoon, world scarcity or no world scarcity. Speaking for myself, I could have gone on like that with Ursula for ever. I have a conscience, but few strong ambitions, as I have said. Oh, I can see Ursula's deep blue eyes now — as they were then — on our honeymoon — and afterwards.

But as soon as we were well and truly in, Ursula brought out no fewer than three more clocks. They were additional to the original cuckoo clock and, I suppose, to the soft-speaking traveler's clock also. As it happens, I was never told at the time what became of that one. When I enquired, putting in a good word for the quietness, Ursula simply replied, "It was a once-for-all clock for a once-for-all purpose, darling," and smiled at me knowingly, or mock-knowingly.

"That was a clock I really liked, darling," I replied, but she said nothing in return, knowing perfectly well that, even then, I did not really like any of the others.

The truth was, from first to last, that one could not *talk* at all to Ursula about the clocks. About many other things, including some that were beyond my own scope, as I am no intellectual, and at almost any time; but never about *them*— about the clocks. One's words

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seemed to slip off her pretty perfect body, her prettily chosen freshly ironed dress, and then to dissolve on the carpet around her pink or yellow high-heeled shoes. I have in mind the grey carpet with the big, bold chains of flowers on which I last saw her standing and saying her listless good-by when I set out to consult Dr. Tweed.

I have said that *one* could not talk on the subject to Ursula. I suppose it would be truer to say that *I* could not. That, before long, was just the point. Perhaps there was another who could.

But, then, what normal, ordinary person — English person, anyway — *could* like those particular clocks, or at least so many of them? A single decorated clock, possibly — if the person cared for things of that general type, as I admit many seem to, though fewer perhaps than formerly. I am fairly sure that, at the best, the quantity of souvenirs brought back to Britain from the Black Forest by the public at large is nothing like what it was when the Prince Consort was alive and setting the vogue, with real trees at Christmas as well. And now it is years after the end of the Second World War.

The clocks that Ursula brought into the house were not all grotesque in themselves: not all of them were carved into grinning gnomes, or giants with long teeth, or bats with wings that seemed to have altered their positions from time to time, though never when one was looking (or, once more, never when *I* was looking) — though *some* of them were, indeed, carved in those ways. It was more the overall uncouth monotony of the clocks that palled: *that*, more than the detail work applied to any one of them. As time passed, Ursula brought in more and more clocks, until, long before the end, I was almost afraid to count how many. I own it. I am not in the least ashamed of it, and what went on to happen, showed that I had no reason to be.

The clocks were so evenly brown — dark brown. When there was colored detail, and often there was a mass of it, the colors were never bright colors. Or rather they were, and, at the same time, they weren't. I have often thought that the sense of color is not strong in Germany. Of course, no one country can expect to have everything, and the last thing I wash to do is introduce an element of rivalry. I detest all things like that.

The colored decoration of the clocks reminded me of fungus on a woodland tree, and there are many who find fungi not only fascinating but actually beautiful. One can eat many of them, if one has to, and sometimes I felt exactly that about

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the colored clock decorations. They looked *edible* — upon complusion. I imagine that the people who thought up the style in the first place based it upon what they saw in the vast dark forests around them. The fungi, the teeth, the wings, the dark or shiny brownness. Even the shrieking and calling at the hours and the quarters might have been imitated from the crying of extinct forest fowl. When there was a chorus of it in the same house, the effect was very much as of a dark glade in which some unfortunate traveler had been deserted — or had merely lost his way.

This house is a fair-sized structure for these times, and the clocks were distributed about it very evenly, there being seldom more than three in any single room, and often only one. I fancy (or perhaps I know) that Ursula wanted there to be no room in our house without *one* of her clocks in it. Distribution was important. It is true that it dispersed the quarterly chorus, but, on the other hand, it positively enhanced the forest glade impression, especially if one were alone in any of the rooms. First, one creature would shrill out, and then, almost instantly, another and another, all at different distances in the house, and with very different cries, and another and another and another, some, one was aware, made of wood, usually carved crudely but elaborately, others made of tin or sheet steel, some made even of plastic. Of course we in the construction business have good reason to be grateful for the coming of plastic, but I like it to keep its proper place, and not set about devouring every other material in the home, as it is very apt to do.

As will be imagined, clocks often spoke simultaneously, but what I found particularly eerie was the sequence of sound that arose when two or more of them not so much coincided as overlapped. This effect, in the nature of things, was seldom repeated in precisely the same form. Clocks only harmonize to *that* degree when a team of scientists has been at work on the design and setting-up (if even then). In this house, the normal tiny variations in the timekeeping led to sounds that were unpredictable and often quite disturbing. And this was true even though most of our clocks spoke but once, however frequently they did it. Not all, however: Ursula had found some expensive pieces in which the bird sang a whole song. One of these vocalists was golden all over, from tail to beak, and lived in a golden *Schloss* with a tiny golden death's-head upon every pinnacle of it. Another was a shrunk-down bird of paradise with

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variegated feathers, though whether the feathers were real or not, I am unable to say. There would seem to be problems in finding feathers like bird of paradise feathers except that they had to be one-tenth, perhaps, of the size. What I *can* testify is that our wee friend squawked as loud as his full-grown cousin can possibly have done in the forest deep.

How could Ursula afford such treasurers? Where did she find her clocks, in any case? Only once, to the best of my belief, did she return after her marriage to Germany. That was when she went with me on our little trip round the region where we had met and had become such friends. And, as far as I am aware, she did not then range even near to the Black Forest.

The answer to my two questions appears to have been that a seller of clocks visited our house when I was not there, and that his terms were easy, though in one sense only.

I am reasonably sure that these visits went on for a long time before I had an inkling of them. Needless to say, that state of affairs is common enough in any suburb, matter mainly for a laughter session, except for those immediately affected.

I used merely to notice when I came home that the clocks had been moved around, sometimes almost all of them, and that every now and then there seemed to have been a new acquisition. Once or twice it was my ears that first told me of the newcomer, rather than my eyes. The mixed-up noise made by all the different clocks had odd effects upon me. I felt tensed-up immediately I entered the house, but it was not entirely disagreeable. Far from it, in fact. The truth seemed to be that this tensing-up brought me nearer to Ursula than at other times, and in a very real and practical way, which many other husbands I am acquainted with would be glad to have the secret of. For example, we were never quite the same together when we were elsewhere, even when we were together in her own homeland. Then it was more like brother and sister, as I have said, though fine in its own way too. What is more, my response to the clocks could vary almost one hundred per cent. Sometimes the real din they made could drive me quite crazy, so that I barely knew what I was doing or even thinking. At other times, I hardly noticed anything. It is difficult to say anything more about it.

Then I began to observe that divers small repairs seemed to have been done. For a long while I said nothing. Ursula could not be made to talk about her clocks, and that seemed to be that. One shakes down even to mysteries, when so

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much else in a relationship is right, as it was in ours. But on a certain, important occasion, there were two things at the same time.

This house offers a completely separate dining room (as well as a third sitting room which I tried for a time to use as a kind of suboffice), and in this dining room Ursula had set up a clock made like a peasant hut, with imitation thatch, from beneath which Clever Kuckuck peeked out every half hour and whistled at us. (We were spared the other two quarters — with this particular clock.) During a period of time before the evening in question, it had become obvious that something was wrong with Kuckuck. Instead of springing at us with his whistle, he seemed merely to sidle out, quite slowly; to stand there hunched to one side; and rather to croak than to shrill. He was plainly ailing, but I said nothing, and he continued to ail for a period of weeks.

Then on that evening I heard him and I saw him as he spoke up at the very instant I entered the dining room. He was once more as good as in the factory.

I truly believe my comment was spontaneous and involuntary.

"Who's fixed Old Cuckoo?" I asked Ursula.

She said nothing. That was as usual on the particular topic, but this time she did not begin serving the broth either. She just stood there with the ladle in her hand, and I swear she was shaking. Well, of course she was. I know very well now.

I think it was this shaking, combined with her rather insulting silence (accustomed though I was), that made me behave badly, which I had almost never done before. Perhaps never at all. I think so. Never to anyone.

"Well, who?"

I am afraid that I half shouted at her. It is well known that seeing a woman in a shaky state either softens a man or hardens him.

As she just went on silently shaking, I bawled out something like "You're just going to tell me what's going on for once. Who is it that looks after these clocks of yours?"

And then — at that precise moment — a voice spoke right behind me. It was a new voice, but what it had to say was not new. What it said was "Cuckoo," but it said it exactly like a human voice, speaking rather low, not at all like one of these infernal machines.

I wheeled round, and there at the center of the dining room sideboard, staring at me, stood a small clock in gilt and silver that had not been there even at breakfast that morning, or, as far as I knew, anywhere else in the house. It was covered with filigree

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which sparkled and winked at me. It was also very fast. I knew that without having to consult my watch or anything else. Ursula, as I have said, never seemed to bother very much about whether her clocks showed the right time or not, but I had become so conscious of time — at least, of *the* time — that for most of it I knew what it was as if by a new instinct.

At this point, Ursula spoke. Her words were: "A man comes from Germany. He knows how to handle German clocks." She spoke quietly but distinctly, as if the words had been rehearsed.

I am sure I stared at her, probably even glared at her.

"How often does he come?" I asked.

"As often as he can manage," she replied. She spoke with considerable dignity, which tended of itself to put me in the wrong.

"And what about you?" I asked.

She smiled — in her usual, sweet way. "*What* about me?" she rejoined.

And, of course, I could not quite answer that. My own question had been too vague, perhaps also too idiomatic for a foreigner, though I knew myself what I meant.

"It is necessary that he should come regularly," Ursula continued. "Necessary for the clocks. He keeps them going." She was still smiling, but still shaking also, possibly more than before. I fancy that what had happened was that she had made a big decision: the decision to disclose something to me for the first time.

"Oh, of course it would never do," I said, sarcastically taking advantage of her, "it would never do if all the clocks stopped at the same time."

And then came the greatest astonishment of that important evening. As I spoke, Ursula went absolutely white and fainted.

She dropped to the floor with a crash, an extremely loud crash for so small a person. And there is something else to be sworn to, if anyone cares. I swear that the small filigree clock with the soft, human voice said "Cuckoo" again at this point, although two or three minutes only could have passed since it had spoken before.

I looked up the *Homelover's Encyclopaedia* and did not take long to bring Ursula round again. But it was, naturally, impossible to return to the same subject. And, what is more, Ursula from then on developed a new wariness which was quite obvious to me — perhaps meant to be obvious, though that was hard to tell. By now I am fairly convinced that the evening when I made Ursula faint was the turning point. It was then that I really

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muffed things; missed my chance — possibly my only chance — of coming frankly to terms with Ursula, and helping her, of helping myself, also.

As it was, Ursula's rather too obvious wariness had a bad effect on me. I feel that if a wife has to have a big secret in her life, she should at least make a successful job of concealing it from her husband completely. It is generally agreed to be the kind of thing a woman should be good at. But no doubt it is particularly difficult when the husband and wife are of different nationalities.

What I found was that the absence of change in Ursula's behavior towards me in any other respect (or, at least, of visible change) only made things worse. I could no longer be completely relaxed with her when all the time I was aware of this whole important topic which we never mentioned. I felt myself beginning to shrink. I seemed to detect a faint patronage in her caresses and her affection. I felt they were like the attentions paid to a child before it is of an age to come to grips with the world on its own: sincere, of course; deeply felt, even; but different from the attentions bestowed on an equal.

I believe that Ursula's idea, conscious or otherwise, was to make up for having to shut me out in one direction by redoubling her assurances in others. As time passed, she seemed for the most part not less demonstrative but more, sometimes almost too responsive to be quite convincing. I found myself comparing my situation with that of a man I know whose wife took to religion. "Nothing could be any good with the marriage after that," he said; and, poor fellow, he actually wept over it, in the presence of another man. It was one of those dreadful liberal kinds of religion too, where one never knows where one is. Not, of course, that I am criticizing religion in a general way. There's much to be said for religion in general. It's just that it's no good for a marriage when one of the parties enters a whole world that the other cannot share. With Ursula it was not perhaps a whole world, but it was certainly a secret world, and certainly a terrible one, insofar as I have ever understood it at all.

I began trying to catch her out. I am ashamed of this, and I was ashamed of it at the time. The bare fact was that I could not help myself. I think that other men in similar situations, or in situations that seemed similar, have felt the same. One cannot prevent oneself setting trips and traps. And something else soon struck me. This was that had not Ursula and I been so close to one another, so

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exclusive, the present situation might have been more manageable, might have caused me less anguish. I saw what a *sensible* case there was for not putting all one's eggs in the same basket. And my seeing the sheer common sense of that — while being totally unable to act upon it — was another thing that was bad for both of us.

By now I had left Rosenberg and Newton and was set up on my own. I called myself a Property Consultant, but right from the start I was making small investments also, and borrowing the money to do it. I have always been able to keep my head above water, partly because I have never sought to fly up to the stars. If one wants to go up there, and to stay there of course, one needs to rise from foundations set up by one's father, and preferably one's grandfather also. My father was just not like that, and neither of my grandfathers made much mark either. As a matter of fact, one of them was no more than a small pawnbroker, a very useful trade in those days, none the less.

Being on my own enabled me to watch over Ursula in a way that would otherwise have been impossible. I insisted upon clients and enquirers making an appointment. A local girl named Stevie looked after all that, and did it quite well, until she insisted on marrying one of those Indian students, strongly against my advice, and then going out there. The next local girl was less satisfactory; the great thing about her being that she was always ill, one thing after another, and all of them supported by medical certificates. Still we got by: most people expect little in the way of efficiency nowadays, and especially when, by one's whole existence in their lives, one is supposed to be making money for them. Nowadays that makes them so guilty and uneasy that difficulties and delays pass unnoticed.

So that when there were no appointments in the book, I was usually to be found snooping round my own happy home, spying on Ursula, hoping (or dreading) to catch her clock man by the heels.

I took to arriving home "unexpectedly." Some days, and with equal unexpectedness, I refused, at the very last moment, to depart from home at all.

I could only be touched when Ursula seemed filled with joy to see me back so soon, or sweetly delighted at finding she had a whole, long day in which to do nothing but look after me, perhaps go to an entertainment with me. For I felt that taking her away from the house for hours on end without warning might serve some useful purpose too. If I had an appointments book, surely the

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clock man must have one also, coming, as he did, from so great a distance?

On several different occasions, and unmistakably, I did hear retreating feet: and each time, or so I thought, the same step, rather quick and, as one might say, sharp on the ground, but never, seemingly, in anything that could properly be called flight. This house offers a completely separate approach to the back door, a path paved with concrete slabs and leading to an access road for the delivery vehicles. But passing round the side of the building from one front to the other is a little troublesome. On one side is a very narrow passage, which, as well as being unevenly paved, is often damp and slippery with dead leaves. On the other, is one of those trellis gates so often seen in the suburbs and which no one ever opens if he can possibly help it. The idea of giving chase, therefore, was hardly even practicable. On the other hand, I was not so far sunk as to tax Ursula with vexing questions as soon as I had entered the house. Nor did I ever hear these steps from *within* the house; always from the little garden in front, or even from the road outside. And I should say at once that the steps of others visiting the back door were often perfectly audible in that way. There was nothing odd in itself about my hearing those particular steps, except that they were particular, or seemed so to me.

And once, but only once, I heard a voice for which I could not account. It was a winter night and there had been a fall of snow. I cannot remember whether I had returned especially early. I took advantage of the muffling snow to creep up the few steps of path from the gate and to bend beneath the lighted living room window with the tightly drawn curtains. (Ursula was attentive to all details.) It was not a thing I often did. In the first place, it was only practicable when it was pitch-dark. In the second place, I disliked having to listen through the window and the wall to those clicking, clacking clocks. None the less, it was the room in which Ursula normally awaited me, a room with a coal fire and big soft sofas. After a while, I straightened up, and set my ear to the icy glass of the window itself. Possibly it was from some kind of intuition or telepathy that I listened that particular night.

I heard a voice, which was certainly a strange one, in more senses than one. It was the voice of a man right enough, and assuredly not of a man I knew. In any case, very few men entered our home as guests. Neither of us wanted them in that way.

It was a rather monotonous,

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rather grating voice. It said something, there was a silence, and then it said something else. I supposed that during what seemed to me to be silences, Ursula had spoken, and that the man had then replied. I strained and strained, but not a sound from Ursula could I hear, and not a word from the man could I understand. Of course not, I thought, he is speaking in a foreign tongue. As for Ursula, it was true that her voice was always a low one (doesn't Shakespeare say that is a good thing in a woman?), and I had acquired little experience of eavesdropping upon it because I had seldom before made the attempt.

From the first moment of hearing it I linked the man's voice with those quick, firm footsteps. It was exactly the voice I should have expected that man to have. I was doubtless almost bound to link the two, but it was really more than a link. I can only state that it was a certainty. And the fact that the man was probably talking in a foreign language further enraged me against all trespassers, all uninvited guests.

I stooped down again as if I might be detected through a crevice between the curtains, even though Ursula's drawing of curtains left no crevices, and then realized that my heart was pounding fit to bust. How preposterous if I were to have one of those attacks that so many men have! The thought did enter my mind, but it availed nothing to stay the whirlwind of fury that was now sweeping through me. I drew myself to my fullest height (I felt it was far more than that) and rapped uncontrollably on the glass with my mother's ruby ring, which I always wear on my right small finger. The noise, I thought, would be audible all the way to the corner down by the church. At last I had made a demonstration of some kind. As I rapped, a few small flakes of snow began once more to descend. Perhaps it would more properly be called sleet.

The front door over to my left opened, and Ursula charged out into the sleety darkness. Her high heels clattered down the crazy paving. She always dressed up to greet my coming home, making a mutual treat of it every evening.

She cried out to me. "Darling!"

In the wide beam of silvery light from the open door, she looked like a fairy in a pantomime.

"Darling, what has *happened*?" she cried.

She stretched her hands up to my shoulders and, even though my shoulders were touched with sleet, kept them there. It occurred to me at once that she was gaining time for someone to make off. I could not bring myself actually to force her away.

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"Who was talking to you?" I cried. But my voice was caught up in the tightness within me and only made a cackle, completely ridiculous.

"Silly boy!" said Ursula, still holding me in such a way that I could not throw her off without using a degree of force that neither of us could forgive.

"Who?" I gurgled out, and then began coughing.

"It was just the bird crying out," she replied, and let go of me altogether. I knew that I had forced her into saying something she had not wished to say. Her ceasing to hold me also: it was true that a visitor would by then have had time to make away, but it was also true that I had behaved in a manner to forfeit her embrace.

Still choking and coughing, quite ludicrous, I dashed into the house; and inside was something which was not ludicrous at all. The hallway and the living room were less than half lighted (it would hardly have been possible even to read, I thought subsequently), but, dim though it was, I saw that indeed a bird there seemed to be: not merely squawking but actually flapping round, just under the living room ceiling, and more than once striking itself with a rap or thud against the fittings.

It was very frightening, and I made a fool of myself. I cried out, "Keep it off! Keep it off!" I covered my eyes with my hands and should have liked to cover my ears also.

It lasted only a matter of seconds. And then Ursula had entered the room behind me and turned the lights full on from the switch plate at the door. She had a slightly detached expression, as of one reluctantly witnessing the inevitable consequence of a solemn warning disregarded.

"It was just the bird crying out," she said again soberly.

But what I saw, now that the light was on, was the look of the cushion on the sofa opposite to the sofa on which Ursula had been sitting. Someone had been seated opposite to her, and there had been no time to smooth away the evidence of it.

As for the bird, it had simply vanished in the brighter light.

All I could do was drag upstairs in order to deal with my attack of coughing. When, after a considerable time, I came down again, the cushions were all as smooth as in a shop, and Ursula was on her feet offering me a glass of sherry. We maintained these little formalities almost every evening.

That night, as we lay together, it struck me that Ursula herself might have sat, for some reason, first on one sofa then on the other, her usual one.

All the same, Ursula *had* once

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actually admitted that a man sometimes came to mess about with the clocks; and about six months after the evening I have just described, I was provided with third-party evidence of it. And from what a quarter!

It was young Wally Walters. He is not a man I care for — if you can call him a man. He seems to think the whole suburb has nothing to do but dance to the tune of his flute. He has opinions of his own on everything, and he puts his nose in everywhere — or tries to. He has had a most unfortunate influence on the Parochial Church Council, and the Amateur Dramatic Society has never been the same since he took it over. What is more, I strongly suspect that he is not normal. I saw a certain amount of that during the war, but men who are continually under fire can, I fancy, be excused almost anything. In our suburb, it is still very much objected to, whatever may be the arguments on the other side. Be that as it may, young Walters always greets me when we happen to meet, as he does everyone else, and I have no wish actually to quarrel with him. Besides, it would probably by now be a mistake.

Young Wally Walters never says "good morning" or "good evening" in the normal way, but always something more casual and personal, such as "hello, Joe" — that at the least; and soon he is trying to put his hand on one's arm. He makes a point of behaving as if everyone were his intimate friend.

And so it was that evening — for it was another case of things happening in the evening.

"Hello, Joe," Wally Walters cooed at me as I stepped round the corner of the road into sight of my home. "You're just in time to miss something."

"Evening," I rejoined. Almost always he has something silly to say, and I make a point of refusing ever to rise to it, if only for the simple reason that it is never worth rising to.

"I said you've just got back in time to miss something."

"I heard you say that," I replied, smiling.

But nothing ever stopped him saying his piece, just like the village idiot.

"Great tall bloke with clocks all over him," said Wally Walters. "Man a mile high at least."

I admit that this time it was I who clutched at him. In any case, he was watching me very steadily with his soft eyes, as I have noticed that he seems to watch everyone.

"*Covered* with clocks," he went on. "All up his back and all round his hat. Just as in the song. And pendulums and weights dangling from both hands. He must be as strong in the back and arms as a

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full-time all-in wrestler. I missed most of his face. Unfortunate. I'd have given a shilling to see all of it. But he was dressed like an old-fashioned undertaker. Wide-brimmed black hat — to carry the clocks, I suppose. And a long black coat — a real, old bedsider, I should call it. Perhaps he *is* a turn of some kind? What do you say? I presume he's a family friend. He came out of your front gate as if he lived there. I say, lay off holding me like an old boa constrictor. I haven't said something out of place, have I?" Of course he said that knowing he had, and knowing that I knew he had.

"Where were *you?*" I asked him, taking my hand off him. I was determined not to overreact.

"Coming out of Dr. Young's. I'm collecting for the Sclerosis, if it interests you, but the doctor's answer was a dusty one."

"Where did the man go?" I asked him, quite calmly and casually, almost, I thought, in his own style.

"You mean, the man with the tickers and tockers?"

Wally Walters was continuing to stare at me in the way I have described. I have never been able to decide whether his gaze is as penetrating as it seems, or whether it is all somewhat of an act.

I nodded, but concealing all impatience.

"Well," said Wally Walters, "I can tell you this. He didn't go into any of the other houses that I could see."

"So," I enquired, as off-handedly as I could, "you followed him for some of the way?"

"Only with my eyes, Joe," he replied with that slightly mocking earnestness of his. "But my eyes followed him until he vanished. He wasn't carrying on like the ordinary door-to-door salesman. He seemed to be making a special call on you. That was why I spoke. Do you collect fancy clocks, Joe?"

"Yes," I replied, looking clean away from him. "As a matter of fact, my wife does collect clocks."

"She'll have had the offer of some weird ones this time," responded Wally Walters. "Bye, Joe." And he sauntered off, looking to right and left for someone else with whom to pass his special time of day.

I stormed into my house, banging several doors, but failed to find Ursula all dressed up in the living room, in accordance with our usual routine.

I tracked her down in the kitchen, where she was slicing up rhubarb, always one of her favorite foodstuffs. "Sorry, darling," she said, wiping her hands on her apron and stretching up to kiss me. "I'm late and you're early."

"No," I replied. "I'm late. I've

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just missed a visitor."

And, as so often, one of the clocks chose that precise moment to shout at me. "Cuckoo. Cuckoo." Only I suppose it said it five times, or six, whichever hour it was.

"Yes," said Ursula, looking away, and not having kissed me after all. "All the clocks have been adjusted."

I could tell that they had. There was an almost simultaneous clamor of booming and screeching from all parts of the house.

"I'm sure that's very useful," I jeered feebly, or I may have said "helpful."

"It's very *necessary,*" Ursula observed calmly, but with more spirit than usual, at least on this particular subject. It was as if she had taken a double dose of some quick-acting tonic. That struck me even at the time. It was as if she were staying herself artificially against my pryings and probings and general gettings at her. I thought even then that one could hardly blame her.

And then — a few weeks later, I suppose, or it may have been two or three months — came what the local paper called our "burglary." It was not really a burglary, because, though it happened during the night, virtually nothing was taken. I imagine it was a job by these modern young thugs who just like smashing everything up out of boredom and because they can so easily come by too much money too young; smashing people up too, when the circumstances are right. No one was ever laid by the heels for wrecking our house. It is very seldom that anyone is. The kids cover up for one another against us older people, and especially when we seem to have a bit of property.

Ursula and I were away for the weekend at the time, or of course I should have wakened up and gone after the thugs with a rod and a gun, as our colonel used to put it when urging us on to the slaughter. We had a rule that we went away for one weekend in every four. I thought it was good for Ursula to have a change at regular intervals, a short breakaway that she knew she could depend on. And I liked to drag her away from her clocks, even though she never seemed quite the same without them. We went to different small hotels in the car — in quiet towns forty or fifty miles away, or sometimes at the seaside, from the Friday night to the Sunday night. I must acknowledge that often we spent much of the time in bed, paying the extra to have the meals brought up. We never went to stay with friends, partly for that reason, but not only. Staying with friends is seldom much of a relaxation in any direction, I should say.

When I woke that Sunday

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morning in the hotel, I thought immediately that Ursula looked different. This was even though I could only see her back. I sat up in bed and really peered at her, as she slept with her head turned away from me, and her mouth a little open. Then I realized what I was seeing: there were grey threads in her beautiful blonde hair, and I had never noticed them before because the light had never fallen in quite the right way to show them up. In that very strong early morning sunlight, the grey in Ursula's hair seemed to come even in streaks, rather than merely in threads. The sight made me feel intensely sad and anxious.

Ursula never had trouble with sleeping. It was one of the many, many nice things about her. That morning, as I watched her — for quite a time, I believe — she was deeply sunk; but suddenly, as people do, she not merely woke up, but sat up. She put a hand at each side of her face, as if she saw something horrifying, or maybe just felt it within and around her. Her eyes were staring out of her head, and, what is more, they looked quite different — like the eyes of some other person.

I put my arms round her and drew her down to me, but even while I did so, I saw that the change in her seemed to go further. The clear, strong, holiday sunshine showed up lines and sags and disfiguring marks that I had never noticed before. I imagine it is a bad moment in any close relationship, however inevitable. I admit that I was quite overcome by it. So sorry did I feel for both of us, and for everybody in the world, that I wept like a rain cloud into Ursula's changed hair that would never, could never, be the same again; nor Ursula, therefore, either.

I do not think we should be ashamed to weep at the proper times, or do anything to stop it, provided that we are not in some crowd of people; but that time it did little to make me feel better. Instead, I kept on noticing more and more wrong with Ursula all day, not only with her looks and youthfulness, but with her spirits and behavior also. She just did not seem the same girl, and I became more and more confused and unsure of myself. I am fairly easily made unsure of myself at the best of times, though almost always I succeed in concealing the fact, apparently to the general satisfaction.

And then, to top it all, when we reached home, we found the scene of ruin I have just referred to. It was quite late, well past eleven o'clock, I am certain; and the very first thing we found was the the lock to the front door had been forced. The young thugs had not

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even done the usual trick with a piece of plastic. They had simply bashed the lock right through. Of course to do as much damage as possible is always their precise idea — pretty well their only idea, as far as one can see. They had done themselves proud in every room of Ursula's and my home — and done their parents and teachers proud too, and indeed their entire generation. In particular, they had stopped all the clocks — *all* of them (Ursula soon made sure of that) — and smashed several of them into pieces that could never be humpty-dumptied again and had to constitute the first clock burial in our garden. Early the next morning I looked after that. The thugs proved to have ripped down the different electric meters — something that is not always too easy to do. I can still hear — and, in a manner, even see — Ursula pitter-pattering in her high heels from room to room in the darkness, and uttering little gasps and screams as she discovered what had been done to her precious clocks, one by one. I doubt whether I shall ever forget it. In fact, I am sure I never shall, as it gave me the first clear and conscious inkling of what was afoot in my home and married life.

After that, the funny man, the expert, was in and out the whole time — trying to make good, to replace. I was hardly in any position to demur, and I am sure his visits were many, but I never saw him once, nor have I ever tracked down anyone who did at that particular time — or who will admit to it.

I even sank so low as to *ask* Wally Walters.

I stopped him one bright afternoon as he sauntered along the road which goes past the new bus sheds. I had even taken trouble to put myself in his way. He was wearing pale mauve trousers, and a crimson silk shirt, open almost to his navel, showing the smooth skin of his chest, the color of peanut butter. I had crossed the road to him.

"Wally," I said, though I have always avoided calling him by that name. "That funny fellow. You remember?"

He nodded with a slowness that was obviously affected. Already his soft gaze was on me.

"With all those clocks?" I went on.

"Of course," said Wally Walters.

"Well," I continued with too much of a gasp. "Have you seen him again?"

"Not I, said the fly. With my little eye I see nothing again. Never the same thing twice. I should remember that for yourself, Joe. It's useful."

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He paused, very calm, while I fumed. The weather was hot and I was perspiring, in any case. I felt a fool, and that was too plainly what I was meant to feel.

"Anything else, Joe? Just while the two of us are alone together?"

"No, thank you."

And he strolled off, to nowhere very much, one knew, but cool as an entire old-fashioned milk dairy.

It was not an encouraging conversation, and it played its part in further damping down a curiosity that I did not wholly want satisfied, in any case. I continued enquiring as opportunity seemed to offer, but in most cases the response suggested only that the other party was embarrassed by my attitude. I failed to find any outside trace of the man who was now visiting my home so frequently, just as the police had failed to find a trace of the young thugs.

Not that there was the very slightest doubt about the man being constantly there. Once, for example, he did an extraordinary thing. I came home to find that he had allowed one of the clocks to drop its heavy weight onto the floor so sharply that it had made a hole right through the boards. Somehow the weight itself had been extricated before I arrived, and resuspended; but the hole inevitably remained; and as poor Ursula was desperately insistent upon its being repaired as soon as possible, I had to spend most of the next morning standing over Chivers, our local jobbing builder's man, while he worked, and exercising all of my authority over him.

"Aren't the clocks rather getting out of control?" I asked Ursula sarcastically.

She made no answer, and did not seem to like what I had said.

In general, by now I was avoiding all sarcasm, indeed all comment of any kind. It had become fairly obvious that Ursula was not at all herself.

She had completely failed to recapture her former brightness — and despite the attentions of our curious visitor, as I could not help thinking to myself. And despite the fact too that his ministrations would appear to have gone well, in that what could be repaired, had been and that replacements were all too numerous and clamorous everywhere, assuredly for me. None the less, Ursula looked like a rag, and when it came to her behavior, that seemed to consist largely in her wringing her hands — literally, wringing her hands. She seemed able to walk from room to room by the hour just wringing her hands. I had never before in my life knowingly seen it done at all, and I found it frightful to watch. And, what was more, when the time came round for our next regular

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weekend in a country hotel, Ursula refused to go. More accurately, she said, very sadly, that "it would be no use her going."

Naturally, I talked and talked and talked with her. It was a moment of crisis, a point of no return, if ever there was one; but I knew all the time that this was nothing, nothing at all, by comparison with what inescapably and most mysteriously lay ahead for me.

Ursula and I never went away together again. Indeed, we never did anything much, except have odd, low-toned disagreements, seldom about anything that could be defined. I had heard often of a home never being the same again once the burglars have been through it, and that replacements can never equal the originals. But Ursula seemed so wan and ill the whole time, so totally unlike what she had been since first I met her, that I began to suspect there was something else.

It was hard not to suppose there had been some sort of quarrel with the other man, though not so easy to guess what about. Indeed, there seemed to me to be some slight, independent evidence of a row. Previously I was always noticing changes in the positioning and the spit-and-polish of the different clocks, to say nothing of the completely new ones that materialized from time to time. Now, for months, I noticed no changes among the clocks at all, only a universal stagnant droopiness; and certainly there were no arrivals. I wondered whether the tall fellow had not been peeved by our recent mishap and had perhaps indicated that while he was prepared to put all to rights that once, yet he must make it clear that he could not so do again. He might have taken a critical view of our being away from the house at the time (and, in any case, had we not spent much of that time merely sprawling about in bed?). That might well be why we had never since been out of the house for a single night, nor looked like being ever again out of it. But of course Ursula and I never said one word to each other about any aspect of all this.

That allowed me the more scope for surmise, and I knew quite well that I had more or less accurately assessed much of what was up. I have often noticed in life that we never really *learn* anything — learn for the first time, I mean. We know everything already, everything that we, as individuals, are capable of knowing, or fit to know. All that other people do for us, at the best, is to remind us, to give our brains a little twist from one set of preoccupations to a slightly different set.

In the end, Ursula seemed so

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run-down that I felt she should see a doctor, though my opinion of doctors is low. I know what goes on in my own profession and see no reason why the medical profession should be any different, by and large. All the same, something had to be done, and in circumstances such as I now found myself in, one clutches. But Ursula positively refused to visit our Dr. Tweed, even though I begged her.

Our little talk on the subject came at the end of a week — at least a week — when we had hardly spoken together at all, let alone done anything else. Ursula was all a dirty white color; her hair was now so streaked and flecked that everyone would notice it at once; and she was plainly losing weight. She had given up any attempt to look pretty, about which previously she had been so careful, so that I loved her for it. And, as I say, she hardly let fall a word, do what I would. Evening after evening, we just sat hopelessly together listening to the clocks striking all over the house.

Ursula had always had much the same attitude to doctors as mine, which was yet another reason why I loved her. But now that made it difficult to press her on the subject.

She simply said, "No," smiled a little, and shook her pretty head. Yes, a pretty head it still was for me, despite changes.

I put my arms round her and kissed her. I knelt at her feet, wept in her lap, and implored her. She still said, "No, no," but no longer smiling, no longer moving at all.

So I thought the best thing — the only thing — was to visit Tweed myself.

Of course, it did no good. Tweed simply took his stand upon the official line that he could say nothing without first "examining the patient" herself. When I repeated that she refused to be "examined" (and, truly, I found it hard to criticize her attitude), he actually said with a smile, "Then, Joe, I suspect that she's not really very ill." Tweed calls me Joe, though I call him Dr. Tweed. Of course he is considerably older than I am, and I've known him since I was a boy. I should find it difficult to speak the same language as these new young doctors. I come between the generations, as it were.

I tried to remonstrate. "After all, I am her husband," I cried, "and I'm very worried about her."

"I could examine *you*," said Tweed, fixing me with his eye, only half humorously.

Obviously it was out of the question even to attempt a description of the strange and oppressive background to it all.

"She's in the grip of some outside power, and it's nearly

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killing her," I cried. It was all I could get out, and of course it sounded ludicrous.

"Now, Joe," said Tweed, professionally conciliating, but firmly silencing me all the same. "Now, Joe. You make me think that I *ought* to examine you. But I've a better idea. Suppose I make a joint appointment for the two of you, so that I can examine you both? I'm sure your wife will agree to that."

"She won't," I said, like a stubborn schoolboy.

"Oh, you husbands! Have you no authority left? Joe, I'm ashamed of you."

And I think there was a bit more between the two of us along the same lines, but I know that Tweed ended by saying: "Now, of course, I'll see your wife. Indeed, I'd *like* to, Joe. You might tell her that. Then just ring for an appointment almost any day, except Tuesday or Friday."

As I drove away, the idea occurred to me of consulting a quack, a proper quack — one of those people who are not on the medical register, and of whom in every company there are always some who speak so highly.

Then I thought that a consultation with a priest might be another possibility.

So as I wove my way home in the car, I was meditating — though fretting might be a better word — upon which priest or parson I could consult. The difficulty was, of course, that Ursula and I belonged to different faiths, Pope John or no Pope John, and that I had always been excluded from Ursula's creed as fully as from her life with the clocks and their overseer. Moreover, as far as I could see, she had largely allowed the matter to lapse for some considerable time. Ursula's official faith was probably most incompatible with that other preoccupation of hers. And, what is more, I myself was on little more than affable nodding terms with our Church of England vicar. I subscribed to things, and I had a regular classified advertisement in the monthly parish magazine, but that was about all. A home where the religions are mixed always presents problems. And, finally, I could not see an appeal to Ursula to confide in her confessor as likely to achieve more than my appeal to her to confide in Tweed. Ursula was locked up within herself, and the key had either been thrown away or entrusted to one who no longer seemed to be visiting us.

Far from easing my mind in any way, my interview with Teed had applied a new twist to my torture, and soon my last and desperate expedient of resorting to a priest had begun to seem hopeless. I had so little knowledge of what a priest could be *expected* to do, even, as it

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were, at the best. By the time I reached home I was so wrought up as to be quite unfit for driving. Though I never, if I can help it, go more than steadily, I had by then no right, properly speaking, to be on the road at all.

I noticed as I chugged past the clock outside the new multiple (it is a polygonal clock with letters making a slogan instead of figures), that it was past three o'clock, even though I had not stopped for any kind of lunch. My idea was that I would look in on Ursula fairly quickly and then make tracks for my neglected office. Ursula knew that I had been to see Tweed, so that something would have to be invented.

Ursula no longer seemed to appreciate the little ceremony of opening the front door to me, and so nowadays I used my own key. As soon as I had opened the door that afternoon, the first indication of chaos lay spread before me.

In the hallway had stood, since Ursula and her friend put it there, a tall clock so bedizened and twisted with carved brown woodwork as to have lost all definable outline or shape. Now this object had been toppled, so that its parts and guts were strewn across the hallway floor. I hurriedly shut the outer door, but then stood for several moments taking in the details of the ruin. The entire head of the clock, containing the main part of the mechanism and the dial, had almost broken away from the rest, so that the effect was as if the clock had been strangled. And all over the hallway mat were disgusting pink and yellow pieces from its inside that I knew nothing of.

It was a revolting sight as well as an alarming one, and, tense as I had been before even entering the house, I was very nearly sick. But I took a final pull on myself and plunged into the living room, of which the door from the hallway was already open.

This time there was devastation of another kind: all the clocks had disappeared.

That morning, the last time I had been in the room, there had been no fewer than six of them, and had I not often counted them — in that particular room, at least? Now there were only marks on the wallpaper, faint shadows of all the different heights and breadths — except that, even more mysteriously, there were a few mechanical parts, quite obviously clock parts, scattered across the roses in the carpet. I think they are roses, but I am no botanist.

I gingerly picked up one or two of the scattered bits, small springs and plates and ratchets, and I stood there examing them as they lay in my hand. Then I shouted out, "Ursula, Ursula, Ursula," at the

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top of my bawl.

There was no response from Ursula, nor in my heart had I expected one. But my shouting instantly brought into action Mrs. Webber, Mrs. Brightside, and Mrs. Delft, who had undoubtedly been keenly awaiting some such development. They are three of our neighbors: one each from the houses on either side, and the third from the house immediately opposite. I had been grimly aware for a long time that events in our home must have given them much to talk about and think about. Now they were all three at my front door.

I cannot hope to separate out their mingled narratives.

During the dinner hour that day, a black van had stopped at our gate. All the ladies were most emphatic about the size of the van: "bigger than an ordinary moving van," one of them went so far as to claim, and the other two agreed with her on the instant. But into this vast vehicle went from my abode only clocks — as far as the ladies could observe — but clock after clock after clock, until the ladies could only disbelieve their eyes. Ursula had done most of the carrying, they said, and "a great struggle" it had been, while the man who came with the van merely stood by, to the growing indignation of my three informants. But then came the heavier pieces, the grandfathers and chiming colossi, and at that point the man did deign to lend a hand, indeed seemed perfectly capable of mastering the huge objects all by himself, entirely alone, without noticeable effort. "He was a great big fellow," said one of the ladies. "As big as his van," agreed another, more awed than facetious.

"How long did it go on?" I put in.

"It seemed like hours and hours, with poor Mrs. Richardson doing so much of the work and having such a struggle."

"Perhaps the man had to look after the stowing?"

"No," they all agreed. "Until near the end he just stood there, twiddling his thumbs." Then two of them added separately: "Just twiddling his thumbs."

At which a silence fell.

I was forced to put the next question into words. "What happened in the end?" I enquired.

In the end, Ursula had mounted the big black van beside the driver and been driven away.

"In which direction?" I asked quite feebly.

They pointed one of the ways the road went.

"We all thought it so strange that we dashed into one another at once."

I nodded.

"It was as if Mrs. Richardson

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had to fight with the clocks. As if they just didn't want to go. And all the time the man just stood there watching her struggle."

"What do you mean by struggle?" I asked. "You mean that some of the clocks were very heavy and angular?"

"Not *only* that," the same lady replied, perhaps bolder with her words than the others. "No, it was just as if the clocks — or some of the clocks — were fighting back." She stopped, but then looked up at the other two. "Wasn't it?" she said in appeal to them. "Didn't you think it was like that?"

"I must say it looked like it," said one of the others. The third lady expressed no view.

"And did you get the same impression with the big clocks?" I asked the lady who had taken the initiative.

But this time they all replied at once: No, the man, having weighed in at that stage, the big clocks had been "mastered" at once, and single-handed.

"What are you going to do?" asked a lady. One can never believe that such a question will be put, but always it is.

I am practiced in social situations, and after a moment's thought I produced a fairly good response. "My wife must have decided to sell her collection of clocks. I am not altogether surprised. I myself have been thinking for some time that we had rather too many for the size of the house."

That made the ladies hesitate for a moment in their turn.

Then one of them said, "You'll find it quieter now." She was obviously meaning to be pleasant and sympathetic.

"Yes," I said, smiling, as one does in the office, and when with clients generally. "Quieter for all of us, I suspect." I knew perfectly well how far the din from Ursula's clocks had carried.

"Not that those clocks wanted to leave," repeated the lady who had just now taken the initiative. "You and Mrs. Richardson must have given them a good home," she smiled sentimentally.

The other ladies plainly thought this was a point in no need of repetition, and the slight embarrassment engendered, facilitated our farewells.

I closed the front door, shot the bolts, and returned to the living room. Presumably, the spare parts which nestled among the roses on the carpet, had fallen off during Ursula's "struggle." And, presumably, the hideous monster I had just stepped across and through in the hallway had successfully defied even Ursula's thumb-twiddling friend, had defeated him, though at the cost of its own life.

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I traversed the entire house, step by step. Every one of the clocks had gone, apart from a scrap or section here and there on the floor; all the clocks but three. Three clocks survived, two of them intact. As well as the monster in the hallway, there remained Ursula's small traveling clock, that had accompanied us on our honeymoon. She appeared to have delved it out from its hiding place — and then done no more with it. I found it on our dressing table, going but not exactly ticking. It never had exactly ticked, of course. But I wondered if it had ever stopped going, even when hidden away for years. There was also the clock that had been left to my mother in old Mr. Rosenberg's will: a foursquare, no-nonsense, British Midlands model that had always gained at least five minutes in every two hours, so that it was as good as useless for actually telling the time. My mother had fiddled endlessly with the so-called regulator, and I too in my late adolescence, but I have never found the regulators of clocks to give one any more control than do those push buttons at pedestrian crossings.

I stumped wearily round from room to room and up and down the stairs, assembling all the clock parts into a compact heap on the rosy living room carpet. I went about it carefully, taking my time, and then I placed the two surviving and intact clocks on top of the heap. Next I unlocked a drawer in my little dressing room or sanctum and got out my club.

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My club is a largely homemade object that had come in remarkably useful for a variety of purposes, including self-protection, during my schooldays. A number of the chaps had things somewhat like it. Since then, I had never had occasion to use my club, though I had always thought that there might again be moments for which it would be exactly the thing — moments, for example, where my home might be invaded from outside at a time when I was within to defend it.

I staggered downstairs once more, worn through to the bone, but not so worn, even then, that I lacked the force to club the heap on the living room carpet to smithereens, whatever — exactly — they may be. I included the two intact clocks in the carnage. Indeed, I set them in the forefront of the battle. There are no beautiful clocks. Everything to do with time is hideous.

Then I edged the shattered bits into dustsheets, and while the neighbors were possibly taking a rest from watching me, I carried through my second clock burial in the back garden.

When for three days there was no sign of or word from my wife, I thought it wise to notify the police.

And now whole weeks have passed.

O Ursula, Ursula.

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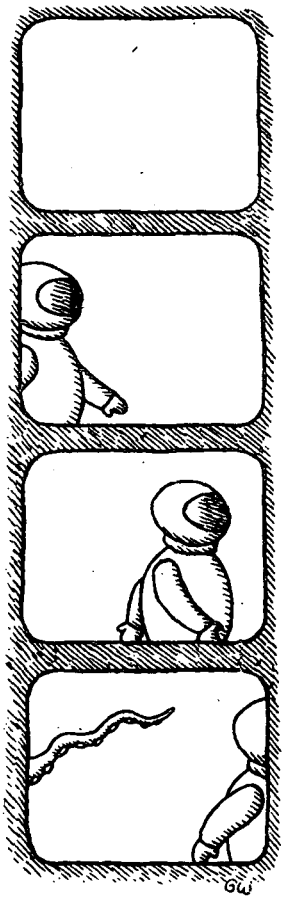
MISCELLANY

Even though I have a few things to catch up on this month, there's still something I'd like to get off my chest before I do. I usually try to stand aside from the fusses, feuds and foibles of the world of science fiction, but there's something lately that's been bugging me; a really minor something, I must admit, but like many things, symptomatic. It's the flack anybody gets who has the temerity to use the term "sci-fi" in front of anyone that is "in." That term has been arbitrarily ruled "out" by the in crowd, mostly because it's common usage by outsiders, and the ins have to have something by which they can prove how *in* they are (the general cause of any semantic quibbling of this sort). On a functional level, it's handy to have several substitute terms for "science fiction," particularly for a writer about the subject who can find himself repeating science fiction several times in a sentence ("fil," "cinema" and "movies" are an equal blessing). Estheticaly, sci-fi is simply easier said and more pleasant sounding than sf. And *as* a symptom, it is a manifestation of that defensive provincialism that has been a problem with the science fiction crowd for far too long. Sci-fi

BAIRD SEARLES

Films



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is becoming more and more popular; we can either incorporate those who are interested and become a more sophisticated field, or we can build our little fences and snobberies (semantic and otherwise) and remain a beleaguered enclave.

Last month was overloaded with new films, and I neglected some because I felt so strongly about "Zardoz." Speaking of that film, the reviews are just in as I write this, and it is as I suspected. The mainstream critics to a man were completely baffled; the reactions ranged from defensive facetiousness to polite condescension. The sf people I've spoken to are more on to the subtleties of the script, but for the most part still display that odd obtuseness *re* a story told in cinematic/visual terms as opposed to one told in print.

Now a quick roundup of some neglected films. "Day of the Dolphin" is marred by Merle's eventually too-melodramatic plot, but Mike Nichols can never be accused of making a dull film. Much of the porpoise photography is beautiful, especially for romantics like myself. "Fantastic Planet" is an animated French-Czech film with, oddly enough, the same problems. Visually, it is highly stylized and stylish. However, the source material, a novel by Stephen Wul, is a little too full of Inner Meaning for my taste; I have never been fond of the use of sci-fi for allegorical ends. Someday the animated film will be used to fully realize a great fantasy or sf work; think how wonderfully Anderson's "The Broken Sword," for instance, could be done with the kind of ultra-realistic style that Disney eventually developed for "The Sleeping Beauty" (a horrid film, but what incredible technique!). And what can one say about "The Exorcist" at this point? There seems to have been an over-reaction to a well done (if perhaps overdone) story of possession, probably because a child is involved. This oversentimental culture of ours still seems to go bananas when a child is connected with something nasty.

Your reaction to "Sleeper" obviously depends on your reaction to Woody Allen; again, I feel that science fiction is being used rather than made an end in itself, though it does point out the much neglected possibilities for humor in sf. There was a very short skit in the Muppets' Valentine TV special concerning the mating habits of an extraterrestrial race that was one of the funniest things I'd seen for some time.

Finally, I had a chance this month to see a real rarity. The Radio City Music Hall went a little amok and had an Art Deco show,

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in the process of which they showed some of the films that had opened there in the '30s. One of these was the 1935 version of "She" of which I gather only a few prints (perhaps just one) remain. Both in itself and as a contrast to the '60s version starring Ursula Andress, this "She" was extremely edifying. Poor H. Rider was subjected to some startling changes: She's kingdom was in the Eurasian Arctic, for God knows what reason; Holly and Leo were accompanied by a pretty Caucasian girl (for obvious reasons); Holly was played by Nigel (Dr. Watson) Bruce, an odd choice indeed — not so odd, come to think of it, as having Leo played by Randolph Scott of the Great Stone Face. Nevertheless, after they had arrived at the Valley of Kor, the book's spirit was adhered to rather faithfully, with many of Haggard's own touches kept in, such as the stone steps worn by the feet of She alone.

Ursula Andress was, of course, a physically magnificent She, but displayed little of the power and magnetism that Ayesha had accumulated over the years. Helen Gahagan (later Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas) seems to have a figure along the lines of Lillian Russell, but made up for it with her handsome face, a commanding presence and a really beautiful voice. The later version also suffered from underproduction; it looked pretty shoddy. This earlier version was made in the days when you could use a cast of (literally) thousands and huge stages — the final festival in Ayesha's great hall was some mardi gras, believe me. And I was no end startled, in the scene where She pronounces judgement, by Her costume; a tight black hood covering head and neck, leaving only the face showing, capped by a crystal crown of spikes and descending into flowing black robes. Sound familiar? The Wicked Queen in "Snow White" was an exact reproduction, almost down to the last detail. All in all, it was a vastly entertaining experience, and I hope somehow this film could become available for wider distribution.

Things-to-come-dept ... tentatively on ABC's schedule for next season: a Gene Roddenberry series, described as "futuristic drama," called "Planet Earth."

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After 25 years Martin Gruen returned to Chaddington with some interesting news — Earth was about to be invaded . . .

The Treyans Are Coming

by MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD

Martin Gruen came back to Chaddington after 25 years away. Few remembered or recognized him. When anyone asked where he had been, he said, "In Trey." If they asked where that was, at first he evaded the question. Yet he had been born in Chaddington and had lived there with his widowed mother for 20 years.

He had come back as a missionary — or a spy.

He had left as a youth not old enough to vote or drink, but old enough to drive, and he was learning to pilot a plane. The day *It* happened was one he was not likely to forget.

Out of high school, and with no chance of college, he had taken the first job he could get that held any prospects. It was as general dogsbody at the local airport, which meant that he had an opportunity to learn to fly, and he availed himself of it. By the time of the Event he was almost ready to apply for a license.

Staying late to get, with permission, a short bit of practice in solo night flying in a private plane, Martin scanned the wind and weather and decided to wait half an hour. He sat outside the despatching office of the little port, its hangar used chiefly by locals with their own small planes and by the county crop dusters, and usually deserted after dark, trying to learn to like smoking a pipe in a youthful effort to achieve a mature facade. It was October, and rather chilly; he was waiting to see if the gathering clouds meant rain.

Suddenly, from the dim runway he saw something — not someone, something — approaching. Startled, he rose and peered.

It was big and shadowy. Indeed, it seemed to be made of shadow. But a voice came out of it — not quite a human voice.

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It said: "Yo coom wi me."

Then the shadow enveloped him, choking his nose and mouth, blurring his sight and hearing. He struggled hard, but how can one fight a shadow? His pipe fell to the ground; he was jerked off his feet and carried upwards as if by a tornado. He felt himself lowered again, dumped onto something hard, and he sensed the motion as some kind of aircraft took off without taxiing, straight into the air like a helicopter.

He passed out.

When he came to, he was — somewhere. He could breathe, though with difficulty, and see and hear, but the huge shadow loomed behind him, and an even huger one before him. They seemed to be speaking to each other.

Like many young people, Martin Gruen had an eidetic memory. He could not understand a word they were saying, but he remembered the sounds. Later, when he had learned their language, he could recollect and interpret them. The larger shadow — by then he had known they were Treyans — had said, "I wanted a younger one," and his abductor had replied, "This was the best I could do."

So Martin started his new life on Trey as a second-rate makeshift.

What sun Trey revolved around he never discovered. It didn't matter. It was Earthlike enough for him to survive, though not comfortably; and he was there not to be assimilated but to be trained as a missionary. Or perhaps one could call it a secret agent. Anyway, he was told that he was to be a pioneer, a small demonstration of a big project — the invasion of Earth.

Having looked all over the relatively nearby planets, the Treyans had decided on Earth. They needed it: not because of overpopulation but because Trey was being depleted of oxygen, and oxygen was their food.

But they had no intention of sharing. Their aim was simple: wipe Earth clean of its present inhabitants and move in. If any remnants of the previous population should survive, let them live in locations inimical to the Treyan physiology.

Physical warfare was hard for a Treyan. They could not be destroyed, but they could destroy only with difficulty. Better to soften the enemy so he would yield without violence. And who better to condition to soften them than one of their own?

Martin Gruen was no intellectual. But he had a sharp mind, he was a good observer, and he had a great fund of common sense. One man could not fight a planetful. He went along. The more he learned, the better.

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It was hard to deal with these shadowy beings. They had no *edges;* they appeared protean, amorphous. He felt like a pebble being rolled in a stream.

But the stream shapes the pebble. Soon he could think of his — teachers? — keepers? — as individuals. They seemed to find it harder to think of him as one; he guessed shrewdly that in planning to take over Earth they had considered all its inhabitants, including the humans, undeveloped animals.

They were not stupid — far from it. They had a high technology, though how such nebulous creatures could fashion such things as spaceships he could not imagine — and was not allowed to find out. But to them Martin was merely a laboratory animal, of the least unintelligent breed they could find on the coveted planet. It never occurred to them, apparently, that he could come to his own conclusions or resist conditioning. They thought he was thoroughly brainwashed. Nevertheless, they warned him that he would be under surveillance after his return and that if he defected he would be punished in a way too horrible to describe. (Naturally, he promised to obey.) Even so, it took 25 Earth years before they felt he was ready. They branded a blue triangle on his arm and took him home.

His mother was dead, without ever knowing what had happened to him. The girls he had gone with were mothers or even grandmothers. The town itself had not changed much, except to grow. But the little local airfield where a boy could borrow a plane and teach himself to fly, and which was practically deserted after nightfall, had become a busy branch terminal for two second-string airlines.

That seemed the logical place for him to earn his livelihood. It was too late for him to qualify as a pilot, but he had no trouble in finding a job as a mechanic at the airport.

What he had to face was the mission with which he had been indoctrinated and which he was resolved to circumvent. This, after all, was his home, these were the people of his earliest recollection, he understood how their minds worked. How could be proceed?

At last a way came to him by which he could pretend to carry out his mission and at the same time make sure it would fail — with a strong hope that he himself would escape the consequences.

The Treyans had fed Gruen upon some kind of synthetic food. They themselves absorbed all their nourishment for their shadowy bodies from their thinning air. It had been hard to accustom himself again to the food of his youth, and

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he had never acquired the habit of drinking alcohol. However, he knew that the way to start putting his plan in action was to frequent bars. So he learned to nurse a beer or two for an evening.

Joe Simmons patronized the Star Lounge. Martin accosted him the first evening he saw him there.

"Hello, Joe," he said. "Remember me—Martin Gruen?"

Simmons stared for a second, then smiled.

"Why, sure. We were in school together, weren't we?"

"All through high school. I've just got back after 25 years."

"Where've you been?"

"Trey."

"Where's that?"

Martin gulped and took the plunge.

"It's another planet, outside our solar system. I was kidnapped and taken there."

Simmons sidled away a bit, then laughed.

"Come on," he retorted. "What's the joke? The moon's as far as we've gone so far."

"No," Martin answered seriously, "it's not a joke. I was kidnapped and trained as a spy. It's a model rehearsal for an invasion. I'm supposed to soften you all up, so you won't resist. If I can put it over locally in this small town, then they'll go ahead with their master plot — kidnap a lot of people from all over Earth and send them on the same mission. Then they'll come in force. They have plenty of time to prepare — they live for 1000 years or so."

Joe Simmons laughed again, but there was embarrassment in his face and a hint of fear in his eyes.

"Excuse me," he said abruptly. "I see a fellow over there I have to talk to on a point of business."

He moved to the back of the room. Gruen saw him in conversation with a man, all right. But they kept glancing at him. It didn't look like a business talk.

Everything he had told Simmons was absolutely true. It worked. Now when he came into the Star Lounge or another bar, he could see his acquaintances shy away from him. Everywhere he went now he told his story, and everywhere the result was the same. When he displayed the blue triangle they took it as further evidence of his delusion.

Much to his relief, soon it was universally believed that he was mad. He let himself be persuaded to go to a psychiatrist, and told his story to him. Within six months he was confined in a mental hospital, where at last he felt safe, and where he could if necessary, stay for the rest of his life. If or when the Treyans came for him, he would be able to say honestly that he had done his utmost; but instead of

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softening the townspeople, they had taken it for granted he was insane and had locked him up. Surely that would exonerate him; the Treyans were too civilized to fight impossibility. He had proved the spy experiment wouldn't work. He had good reason to hope they would wipe the slate clean and try some other method — leaving him secure and free.

Until a year later. Then, working in the hospital garden, as the nonviolent inmates were encouraged to do, he met a man from another ward who told Martin his name was Walter Krouse and he hailed from the opposite end of the State. It was warm, and they rolled their shirtsleeves up.

Both of them saw the blue triangle on the other's arm. Both started simultaneously to address the other in the whispering, sighing Treyan language.

The Treyans had lied, to each of them and to how many others? Each had been told he was first and only secret agent, the pioneer spy.

That they too, again — and how many others? — had thought of the same way out of their dilemma was a coincidence. But that there were unknown numbers of Treyan missionaries on Earth was a frightening revelation.

For two reasons: Some of the spies almost certainly would retain their conditioning and work faithfully at their assignment to soften up Earth for the invaders. And those who had failed would undoubtedly be checked and reported on by the nearest successfully brainwashed agent — and the explanation on which Martin had relied would be seen for the pretext it was.

"What shall we do?" he cried. His fellow victim shook his head.

"No way," he said. "Unless we could get out of here — I suppose we could claim our story was a hallucination, and we'd recovered —"

"A joint hallucination? It's a wonder that hasn't already been noticed. Then they might begin to believe us and think in terms of treason instead of psychosis."

"Too true. Our surest bet is to stick it out here and hope for the best. We must avoid each other all we can. Perhaps in our therapeutic sessions we could gradually alter our 'illusions' a bit until they'd be more generalized and cease to resemble each other.

"Excuse my pomposity. I was a college professor when they snatched me."

"I was an airfield mechanic. Of course the company fired me as soon as I was certified."

"As my college did me."

"What scares me now is that we don't know how long this has been going on, or with what success.

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Right now, the Treyans may already be preparing without warning. We *have* to think of a—"

"Sh!" Krouse muttered. One of the orderlies had paused beside them.

"Doing all right, fellows?" he inquired amiably.

They nodded, and Gruen produced the wide grin with which he proclaimed his lunacy. The orderly strolled away.

In the summer heat he had taken off his white coat to reveal a short-sleeved shirt.

His arm bore a blue triangle.

They looked at each other in terror.

But as the days went by and nothing happened, Martin began to breathe easily again.

... Two weeks later, Martin Gruen and Walter Krouse both suddenly disappeared from the hospital grounds. They were hunted for as escapers.

Neither of them was ever seen again. They had been dragged in a cloud of fog onto the alien spaceship. What punishment was inflicted on them or other "traitors" may never be known on Earth....

Haven't you noticed how, despite the efforts of the conservationists, smog is increasing all over the world? Does it *all* come from auto exhausts and industry?

Haven't you heard sometimes in the wind a singing sound that almost resembles a language? Hasn't it been harder to breathe of late, as if the available oxygen were being seeped away? Is *all* the energy crisis the economic and political problem it is alleged to be?

Ask the astronauts if all their airsickness can be accounted for by the expected results of loss of gravity: how good was their oxygen supply? Ask the meteorologists why there have been those strange recent changes in the atmosphere and hence in the climate.

Have you glimpsed unaccountable shadows passing, leaving you wondering if something has gone wrong with your sight?

The Treyans are coming.

Perhaps they have already come.

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A surprising and moving story about a misfit in a society that has evolved in wondrous ways. *Plus ca change . . .*

Bond and Free

by PAMELA SARGENT

I can't remember anything that happened to me before I came here, and neither can the others, or if they can they're not saying. Tamu says he can, but he's lying, as he lies about everything else. He is squatting on the balustrade now, peering at the green meadow that surrounds us on all sides. He sits on his heels and balances on his toes. His brown skin seems to gleam in the sunlight. He is mocking me, waiting to see how long I can stand it before I get up and rush across the balcony to him, afraid that he might slip and fall to the ground a hundred feet below. But I no longer care. I realize at last that Tamu with his almost perfect reflexes will not fall and will not do anything that will actually endanger him in any way. His balancing act is a lie, his precariousness on the edge of the balustrade a falsity. He turns his head toward me, and I smile, showing him my teeth.

"Stop moving your face," Tomas says. Tomas is busy applying my make-up, and he gets upset if I ruin his handiwork. It takes him at least an hour to do it every day, and that doesn't include the time he spends on my hair. Then he expects me to spend the rest of the day doing nothing that would endanger his creation. That usually means doing nothing at all except reading or talking with the other patients. Last week I defied him and went down to swim in the pool. When I came out of the water with my hair plastered flat against my head and my make-up ruined, poor Tomas almost cried; he had spent three hours on me that day. He sulked for two days afterward, and I was able to roam around outside letting the wind whip my hair, able to eat without worrying about my lip paint. Then Tomas stopped sulking and my holiday was over.

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Tamu is standing on his head now, hands in front of him, knees on his elbows. "There," says Tomas. "I think you're done." He holds his hand mirror in front of me. I am black and gold today, black lines over eyelids and brows, gold dust heavy on my lids and sprinkled on my cheekbones. My hair too is thick with gold dust, my lips painted gold, my eyes made black by lenses. Tomas has dressed me in a black velvet dress, and golden earrings hang like chains to my shoulders. Even my skin is golden today; my tan has begun to fade. "Please don't," he says, "move unnecessarily."

"I can't," I say, "move at all." The heavy velvet dress, stiff with stays that push my breasts up and pinch my waist in, is a cage. I can feel sweat under my arms and between my breasts. "I don't know why you couldn't find something more comfortable; I can hardly breathe." I am taking short, shallow breaths, unable to inhale deeply, and I am afraid that if I stand at all, I may faint.

"You were comfortable yesterday; you don't have to be today." Yesterday was a green leotard, green eyes, green spray on my hair. Tomas didn't like that effect and he didn't like the leotard. My thighs were too thin; my stomach was a bit too round. He had told me not to eat any supper because I was getting fat, and so I ate twice as much as I usually do. He is retaliating. It will be a miracle if I can eat at all now with the stays pinching at my waist.

"Perfect," Tomas murmurs, "perfect. I love you, Alia; that's why I make you beautiful. And I love you even more today; you're more beautiful than I've ever made you." I glance at him and notice the bulge in his crotch, under his shabby pants.

"Why are you such a slob, then?" I ask. Tomas is heavy around the waist and his dirty brown hair hangs down to his chest. He is wearing what he always wears, brown pants and a torn white vest. The vest is unbuttoned and spotted with stains. "Why don't you use some of your expertise on your own ugly self?" I look at his paunch and make a face. He seems upset now, not because of what I've said, but because he is afraid I'll disturb my make-up by showing any expression at all.

"I'm making *you* beautiful," Tomas protests. "Why should I waste the time on myself when it's obvious that nothing will come of it anyway." He pats his stomach. "I suppose I could diet. I love you, Alia. You're perfection today, a vision..."

"A vision!" says Tamu, who has given up on his balancing act for

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now. "A vision I would prefer to seek naked and on the bed inside."

"You had enough last night," I say. Tamu leers at me. I stick out my tongue at him.

"Stop that," says Tomas, "you're going to ruin your make-up."

"I'm dying," says Tamu. He sits on the arm of my chair. "Dr. Ehlah said I was dying. My insides are rotting away. I'm going to suffer terribly."

"Why don't you jump off the balcony, then?" I reply. Tamu is unable to keep from lying.

"Because then I couldn't see you any more, Alia," he says. "Because then I couldn't spend all that time ploughing your furrow. I don't mind suffering when I think of all the happy hours that await me in your presence, hours that will take my mind off my suffering if only for a little while." Tamu stands and begins to turn on his toes, stretching his arms toward the sun.

"Let's go downstairs," Tomas says. "Let's go and sit in the ballroom so that everyone else can see you."

"I can't move. I can't even get through our room in this thing, let alone down the stairs." I feel perspiration on my face. Tomas begins to dab at it with a handkerchief.

"I don't want to die," Tamu suddenly shouts. "I want to live long enough to see my parents again, they were such fine people. They lived in a beautiful house in a large city. We had purple carpets on the floor, velvet carpets, and I would stand on them for hours, rubbing my feet on them, and sometimes I would even roll across them naked. They used to bring me little girls to play with."

"I thought they had a fine ranch with horses," I say, "and that they used to bring you little boys."

Tamu is pouting now. I am not supposed to notice his lies and have hurt his feelings by mentioning an old story. He sulks for a few seconds, then brightens. "They had the ranch too," he goes on, "and a cottage near a woodland glade. I used to watch my mother there while she was taking on the gardener."

I have to admire Tamu, in a way. At least he can invent a past. He and Tomas are much more intelligent than I am, and they can always find something to say about anything. I can do nothing but respond to their talk, rarely having anything of my own to offer. I expect this with Tomas; he is older and has been here for ten years or more. But Tamu is only fourteen. I should be cleverer than he. I have been here three years and am almost seventeen. Tamu has been here three months. I introduced

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him to Tomas, I let him move his bed into our room, and he doesn't show me proper deference. He is only the intermediary between Tomas and myself, the tool through which Tomas expresses his love for me physically, and yet he insists on acting as if he is autonomous. But he is only a tool which pounds away in my open orifice while I cry out my love for Tomas, and afterward presents his ass to Tomas while Tomas cries out to me. It is I who lie in the big bed with Tomas during the night while he gazes down at my ruined make-up and speaks to me about how short-lived his art is, how soon beauty dies. Tamu has to lie in the small bed. Let him prance around with his pretty ass! He is only a tool.

"Why are we here," Tomas says, "and why can't we remember? I must have asked myself that a million times."

"I don't know why you do," I say. "The doctors told us. We're prone to certain illnesses and have to be kept in a restricted environment."

"I don't think that's true. I didn't believe it when I first came here, and I don't believe it now."

"What difference does it make?"

"Aren't you curious, Alia?"

"Sure," I say. "But I'm not going to sit around thinking about it. One day, I'll just get up and walk out of here, and I'll keep going until I see what's outside. You can come along if you want."

"But you can't just walk out of here," he says, looking worried.

"Why not? No one will stop me. I can just keep going, as far as I want to. I walked out once and stayed away for the whole day; I didn't come back until after supper; you remember, you were really upset. But the doctors didn't care."

Tomas is agitated. "You can't," he says. "You're susceptible to certain diseases; that's why you're here."

"But I thought you didn't believe that."

"Well, I don't entirely, but I haven't disproved it either. If I'm going to find out anything, I'll find it out here."

"Suit yourself," I say. "You should come along, though; it might be a real adventure. This place is so boring I'd think you'd welcome the chance."

"I don't think it's boring. There's a library, plenty of people to talk to, and you, Alia. Why should I be bored?"

I begin to shrug my shoulders, then feel the pinch of my stays. Tamu is turning cartwheels now. "I'm dying," he shouts to us. "My bones will rot away until I can only flow across the floor." He begins to dance across the balcony, whirling

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faster and faster, his arms straight out from his shoulders, until I am almost dizzy watching him. I reach for Tomas' hand. He holds it, then kisses my golden-nailed fingers.

"You are beautiful," he says.

The fire of sunrise blazed beyond the balcony. Awakening, Alia sat up in her large brass-railed bed and gazed across the room.

Tomas had betrayed her again, creeping out of bed in the middle of the night to Tamu. She could see their bodies huddled together under Tamu's sheets, moles burrowing under the bedclothes.

Tamu was only an intermediary. Alia had never made love to him unless Tomas was present and able to witness the act. Yet Tomas had gone to Tamu while assuming that she still slept. She had heard their moans and remembered that it was Tamu's name he called out and not hers.

Well, thought Alia, it hardly matters now. She was leaving this morning. If the others were content to sit around here, that was their business. She had wanted Tomas to accompany her, but he, along with everyone else, preferred to huddle in the hospital even though he, and almost everyone else, did not really believe what the doctors had told them. No one had forbidden them to leave; none of them really wanted to go.

She put on her walking boots, straightened her slacks and checked her small knapsack. It was filled with food packets stolen from the kitchen and a canteen of water. She had a knife and could sleep on the ground using the knapsack as a pillow.

Alia hoisted the knapsack onto her back, then turned toward Tamu's bed. The two were still sleeping. She opened the door and walked out into the red-carpeted hallway.

No one else was up yet. She walked down the hallway to the elevator and pushed the down button. Tomas was afraid of the elevator and never let her use it; Tamu laughed at Tomas for his fear but wouldn't ride it either. The doors opened and she stepped aboard.

The elevator hummed down to the first floor lobby and stopped with a jolt. Alia paced through the lobby. Her booted footsteps echoed on the smooth white surface of the floor. Other Alias marched on either side of the large room, reflected from the mirrors that lined the walls. All of the Alias moved toward the arched doorway, then disappeared, leaving only one to pass through the doorway and outside the hospital.

The morning air was cool and the grass around the building still dewy. As she walked, Alia saw the

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tips of her boots darken with moisture. She pivoted and looked back.

The hospital seemed to tower above her. It was an ugly building, tall and square with baroque balustrades surrounding balconies on every floor of the thirty-story structure. The heavy wooden doors, propped open, which led into the lobby seemed out of place, an afterthought. She turned away from the hospital. Grasslands surrounded the building on all sides; the only tree she had ever seen was the weeping willow near the back entrance.

Alia set out across the green field in front of her. She hoped Tomas wouldn't worry, remembered seeing him under Tamu's sheets, then began to wish that he would worry a little. He would have to dress someone else today, if anyone would sit still that long. She laughed to herself.

The knapsack had grown heavier. Alia stopped, removed it and sat down. She was still surrounded by green meadows, and she could still see the hospital. It was small and close to the horizon, a grey block against the blue sky.

She couldn't have made much progress if she could still see the hospital. Annoyed, she stood up and began to drag her knapsack behind her. The cursed thing seemed to be made of lead.

Alia trudged on, dragging the knapsack. Occasionally she turned and, seeing the grey block, would keep going. The weather had grown warmer, and her clothes were sticking to her. She pushed on, dragging the knapsack up a small hill and down the other side, through a field of dandelions and up another small hill. She moved on until she was exhausted and had to stop once more.

She fell next to the knapsack and stretched out on the ground, catching her breath. At last she sat up and climbed to her feet.

The hospital had vanished.

She sat down again, facing her long afternoon shadow. At last she was free of the place. If Tomas had been with her, he would be trying to guess what was beyond the meadow, if indeed there was anything beyond the meadow. Alia was content to wait. She shivered, suddenly apprehensive.

Alia had found some trees by nightfall and decided to sleep under them, feeling, somehow, that she would be safer there. By morning, she regretted the decision. The ground under the trees had been harder than the soft meadowland.

She began to walk around the trees, feeling numb in the cool morning air. Her jacket was damp

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with dew. "This is ridiculous," she said aloud, "walking all this way to see five trees." Her voice sounded hollow. She shuddered and decided not to talk to herself again.

She hoisted the knapsack onto her back and set off. Occasionally she looked back. The trees moved closer to the horizon and finally disappeared. A song Tamu had taught her ran through her mind, repeating itself monotonously.

At noon she sat down to rest. The silence of the grasslands had grown oppressive. She pulled out her canteen and drank noisily, smacking her lips between swallows. She opened a packet and gnawed at the rubbery chicken inside, then let out a loud belch.

Ahead of her was a very high hill, higher at least than any she had seen so far. She noticed a small structure on the side of the hill, squinted at it near-sightedly, but couldn't see what it was.

She hurried toward the hill, curious now. She moved quickly, ignoring the warmth of the sunlight and the increasing heaviness of the knapsack she was dragging.

Reaching the hill, she began to climb toward the structure. It was a well. She had seen a painting of a well in the library; in fact, this looked like the same one, brown stones, wooden bucket parked on the edge, wild violets growing nearby.

There was one difference. She could see a wooden plank resting against the well. Someone had painted white letters on the plank. She read the message:

WATER — FILL UP

YOU'RE GOING TO NEED IT

Alia sat down and stared at the plank. Tomas, she thought, would have been terrified by now. She reached over and touched one of the white letters with her finger.

The paint was still wet.

She jumped up quickly and looked around. She saw nothing but grassy fields on all sides. Her hands were trembling. Someone had painted the sign very recently.

Whoever it was might be just over the hill.

Alia paced near the well, clenching her hands, trying to calm herself. Someone is telling me I need water, she thought, that's all; I'll fill my canteen and the empty packets and reseal them, and then I'll see what's over the hill.

She lowered the bucket into the well, then filled her canteen and empty food packets. She resumed her climb. The hill was steeper than it looked, and her legs ached from the exertion. The weather had grown extremely warm, and the air seemed dryer. The knapsack was pushing her toward the ground, and her calf muscles tightened.

At last, panting, she reached

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the top of the hill and looked around.

The green grass continued to the bottom of the hill, then stopped abruptly. In front of her, Alia could see only dry, flat desert land. The desert stretched to high mountains far in the distance, at least a day's walk away. There was no sign of life anywhere on the desert wastes except at one point midway to the mountains. There, she could see what looked like a small group of buildings. They seemed to shimmer before her eyes.

People. There might be people there.

A wave of panic swept over her. I should go back, she thought wildly, and shuddered at the thought of the diseases to which she might be exposing herself.

She turned quickly, tripped, and began to roll back down the hill, finally sliding to a stop.

"Stop it," she said aloud, "if you panic now, you've come all this way for nothing." Her voice was harsh, and she whispered her next words. "I'll stay near the well, and I'll sleep there, and rest, and decide tomorrow."

She walked back down to the well where, after a hasty look around, she stripped off her clothes and then lowered the bucket for water. She poured it over her body, welcoming the coolness. The water was a silver stream, refreshing and calming her. She threw herself to the ground, feeling the warm rays of the sun on her back, sniffing at the wild violets.

She set out across the desert before dawn. It was cold at first, but after walking for a while, she peeled off her jacket and put it into the knapsack.

The sun was burning her face, and she could feel the desert heat through her boots. Alia began to whistle, marching in time to the tune. The desert blurred around her, and the thin layer of sand over rock seemed almost white. She kept marching, pausing only long enough to drink from one of the food packets.

Ahead of her, the buildings in the center of the desert shimmered. As she came closer, she noticed something odd about them. The ones at the edge of the town were not buildings at all, but only facades supported by wooden rails, as if the entire town was nothing more than a stage set. Moving nearer, she saw that in fact there was only one real building in the entire town, in the center of the facade.

She suddenly felt foolish, trudging across the desert to meet this display. She walked over to the building in the center, an old rickety wooden structure three stories high, feeling more alone

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than ever. It would at least shade her from the desert heat for a while. She peered inside the front window and saw an unlighted room with round tables, chairs, and a long bar on one side near the wall. She tried the door. It opened easily and she walked inside.

Everything in the room was coated with a layer of grey dust. Alia walked to a table near the bar and took the knapsack off her back, placing it next to a chair. Rummaging in the sack, she pulled out her jacket and dusted off the table. Then she sat down, resting her head on the tabletop.

She had come on a fool's errand. She should have turned back at the well, but she had come too far to turn back now. She sighed and closed her eyes.

"My God, honey, don't look so sad. What you need is a cold beer." Alia sat up quickly.

A tall busty red-headed woman was standing near her, arms resting on the dusty bar. She smiled at Alia.

"Who are you?" shouted Alia, almost rising to her feet.

"Don't look so worried, honey. My name's Eta. I own this establishment." The woman walked toward her, carrying a bottle. She wore a long purple dress which trailed behind her, picking up dust and leaving a streak on the floor. She put the bottle in front of Alia and sat down across from her, placing her elbows on the table. "Go head, it's on me. Business is so lousy lately, I can't lose much more giving it away." Eta smiled and fluttered her thick black eyelashes.

Alia picked up the beer. It was cold and wet with beads of condensation. She sipped at it tentatively, then began to gulp it down.

"You know," said Eta, "everyone used to come here. Why you couldn't hardly find a place to rest your ass. But you know how people are; they go to a place, and before you know it they're moving on to a new place because it's got a band or hot horsy dervs or some other fool thing. I don't have all that, but I run an honest bar, and I don't care if people get boisterous or the girls want to make some spare money on the side or somebody wants to throw some chairs around, but I guess Eta's place just isn't good enough any more."

Alia stared at the woman. She could not understand what Eta was talking about and was afraid to ask. "This whole damn town used to come here," Eta went on. "I remember when Gar Tuli got so mad he threw a whole table through that window over there, and his woman — she was big, honey — sent him through the window when she found out about him and Neela. What a night!"

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Alia looked down at her beer bottle. The woman must be mad. This could never have been a town, not unless everyone had moved and taken the buildings with them. "Maybe they'll all come back someday," she said, trying to smile sympathetically, "when they get tired of the other place." She finished her beer. Eta's eyes seemed to flicker a bit as she watched Alia. The woman was silent for a few seconds; then she slapped her thigh and laughed loudly.

"You're all right, honey. You know the right thing to say. I feel better already." Eta got to her feet. "You want another beer?"

Alia shrugged. Eta smiled over to the bar, making another trail in the dust with her train. She bent over behind the bar, then stood up. Alia could see silver beads on the bottle Eta was holding and wondered how the woman kept the beer cold.

"Where you headed for?" asked Eta.

"I thought I'd take a look at the mountains," Alia muttered. Eta came back with the beer and sat down again.

"There's nothing over there, honey," the woman said.

"How long does it take to get there?"

"A few hours. But I'd advise you to head back where you came from. Or you can stay here and maybe we can figure out how to get some customers. We oughta think of something between the two of us."

Alia stood up. "You're insane," she said quietly. Eta didn't respond. "You are really demented. There aren't any people here; there aren't even any buildings except this one. I've got better things to do than spend time with a madwoman." She picked up the knapsack, watching Eta. The woman was silent. Alia moved toward the door.

Suddenly Eta chuckled. "You sound like Gar Tuli," she said. "You know what he used to say? He used to say, 'Eta, you got cobwebs in the attic.' I think you better go back where you came from."

"Thank you for the drink," said Alia. "If I see anybody, I'll be sure to recommend your hospitality." She left Eta sitting at the table and stepped into the hot dry air outside. As she walked away from the building and past the facades on either side of her, she began to feel a bit more energetic in spite of the heat. Tendrils of guilt brushed at her mind, and she speculated about Eta, thinking that perhaps she should have stayed with her for a day, talked to her, and offered some help. She pushed Eta out of her mind. The woman was demented, after all; she could have

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done nothing for her. It was a wonder she had lasted in the middle of the desert; the woman must be more resourceful than she seemed.

Alia burped, then began to whistle again as she marched toward the mountains.

Alia had reached the mountains during the night and slept on the hard desert ground with her jacket wrapped around her. By morning she was shivering from the cold, and she welcomed the sight of the blood-red sun as it began to climb above the now-orange wilderness.

She looked up at the mountain above her. It was rocky and not quite as high as she had thought, although it would take some time to get to the summit. She opened her knapsack and removed some food.

"Mind if I join you?" said a voice. Alia turned her head quickly. A skinny old man sat on the rocks above her.

"Come on down." The old man clambered over the rocky slopes and was soon sitting next to her. He had an untrimmed grey beard which seemed to wobble on his face, and his shabby brown shirt, black slacks and boots showed signs of wear.

"I sure am hungry," the man said, eying her dried beef.

"I can only give you one packet." She rummaged in the sack and took out one of the apricot bars, which tasted sour anyway, and tossed it to him.

"I can take you up the mountain," said the man, tearing open the food packet. "You can go up yourself, but it'll take you a lot longer; you don't know the mountain. I can take you up in three, four hours maybe."

Alia looked around at the mountain, then back at the man. "Halfway up it gets hard," he went on. "But I know a quick way."

"All right," said Alia. It would be safer going up with someone anyway, whether the old man could take her up more quickly or not. "All right, old man."

"I could use some more food first and water too." She took out another apricot bar and a packet filled with water.

"Where are you from, old man?"

He squinted at her. "None of your business."

"You wouldn't happen to be acquainted with Eta's place?"

"I'm not acquainted with anybody. I keep to myself and you should do the same." The old man finished his food and got to his feet. "Come on," he said. He began to climb over the rocks. Alia followed him, then noticed that there was a clearly defined path through the rocky slopes.

"I could have found this path

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myself, you old fraud," she shouted at the figure ahead of her.

"I told you," he shouted back, "it's halfway up you run into trouble." Alia sighed and kept going. Her muscles soon began to knot painfully.

"I don't suppose you could help carry this knapsack for a while," she shouted.

"Why the hell should I? It isn't mine."

"What's over the mountain?"

"You'll find out." His voice was faint. He was getting ahead of her.

She kept climbing, trying to ignore the hot sun. She could go on for another two days before heading back to the hospital, maybe longer on short rations. She should have brought more. She wiped the sweat from her face and wished for a bath. Tamu's mindless song circled her mind once more as she climbed, stopped to rest, then climbed some more. The old man had disappeared.

At last she came to the end of the path. A smaller path forked to the right between two boulders. Alia looked up and saw only sheer cliff surface above her.

The old man had apparently been waiting. He sat on the ground, smiling complacently.

"What now?" she asked. The old man groaned and got up.

"And I just got comfortable too," he grumbled. He turned and she followed him along the small path until they reached a cave in the side of the mountain.

"Here we are," said the man. Above the cave in large letters someone had painted:

ENTER CAVE
CLIMB STAIRS TO TOP

"You old fraud," said Alia. She grabbed the man by the shoulders and pushed him against a boulder. "I could have found this cave myself." He twisted loose and ran past her back along the path. "Come back here," she shouted after him. "Aren't you going to the top?"

"Why bother?" The old man's voice floated back to her. "There's nothing up there."

She stood beside the cave, feeling angry and foolish, then walked inside. Someone had carved a flight of stairs in the rock; the steps curved around the cave walls in a spiral. She looked up and saw a speck of light above her.

She chuckled, then began to laugh. This is too easy, she thought; they're not making it hard enough; anyone can just walk out of the hospital and keep going. It wasn't consistent with the doctors' desire to prevent the exposure of susceptible people to disease.

On the other hand, she thought as she began to climb the stone steps, I haven't really seen anybody I could get a disease from except a

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couple of lunatics. Suddenly she felt cold. Maybe they *were* sick; maybe they, like her, had left the hospital and become ill, losing their minds in the process. Her stomach turned. She should go back.

She kept going up the steps. She would at least see what was over the mountain first. The stairway was dark and only intermittently lighted by phosphorescent green bars attached to the walls. She kept close to the wall, not wanting to lose her balance too close to the edge of the steps, which had no rail.

Alia climbed, stopping frequently to rest. She began to count steps and lost track of the number. She started to sing and lost track of the time. She was almost hynotized by the time she reached the top of the stairs and could at last see the sky clearly. It looked like late afternoon.

Above her was a small metal ladder. It was attached to the wall and would take her out of the mountain. She hurried up the ladder. As she climbed out, a breeze wafted past her, and she smelled salty air.

She stood at the summit and looked around. A path had apparently been carved in this side of the mountain also; she could see its clearly defined boundaries among the rocks and boulders. At the bottom of the mountain there was a large expanse of white sand and beyond that a body of water stretching to the horizon. Even at this distance, she could hear the thunder of breakers as waves rolled toward the shore. An ocean, she thought. Tomas had shown her a picture of one in the library and had told her that it was thousands of miles wide, with salty water unfit to drink.

Alia sat down and stared at the grey sea. There was nowhere to go from this point. The mountains extended along the shore for as far as she could see. She could not get across the ocean. She would have to go back, get more supplies, try a different route. But maybe the doctors, who hadn't had to restrict anyone up to now, wouldn't let her leave again. They might be searching for her.

She considered the hospital. Perhaps there was nothing outside the hospital, and no one except a few demented individuals such as Eta or the old man. The doctors themselves might be susceptible to disease. But that wouldn't explain why some doctors disappeared for weeks at a time, or how supplies got to the hospital. No, there had to be other people somewhere.

If I've been exposed to disease, she thought, I'm already dead. I might as well go on, or the whole trip is for nothing. I'll walk till I drop, I'll stretch the food and water, I have to know. The image of

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Tomas flickered across her mind, and she felt a pang of regret, then shrugged it off.

Alia started down the mountain.

Four more sunrises, four sunsets; on the fifth day she was still walking, seeing nothing but white sand and ocean on her left, white sand and mountains on her right. The arc of the red sun marked time for her now; she no longer divided her days with meals, eating only when she grew weak. She was almost out of food and water. She could not turn back; she would not even get to the desert.

A crab scuttled past her. She stared at it as it scurried beneath a wave, then heard a cry above her. She looked up. Three gulls circled overhead. She turned to the mountains and saw trees and bushes growing on the slopes. The landscape around her had changed. She had left the barren mountains and arid desert behind.

Her tired feet carried her on. Two days before, she had washed her feet in the ocean, crying out in pain as the salty water washed over the bleeding blisters. She glanced at the ocean. It was receding from her as if it had postponed its apology until now. It withdrew from her and began to creep toward the horizon, leaving behind beached crabs and fish.

Food. It would be simple to gather up some of the fish and store it in empty food packets. With luck, she might be able to start a fire with some wood from the mountain slopes. If necessary, she would eat the fish raw. The ocean kept retreating, leaving behind an almost unnatural silence. Alia began to walk toward some beached fish, squashing the wet soft sand under her feet.

"Hey!" a voice shouted. She turned and saw a figure running across the beach toward her. It was a young man with black hair, well-tanned, clad only in a pair of ragged blue shorts. He waved his arms frantically as he ran.

He stopped near her, panting for breath. "Run!" he shouted. "Run for the mountains, run!"

"Why?"

"Don't ask, run!" The young man took off. She looked toward the ocean.

A wall of water was on the horizon. It was coming toward the shore, threatening to smash her and everything on the beach. She ran after the young man, her terror making it easy for her to catch up with him. She ran, pounding through the sand, ignoring the knapsack on her back, not even looking over her shoulder at the wave. She could hear it now, a low distant rumble coming ever closer to them. They reached the

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mountain, and she followed the man up the slope, ignoring the tree branches and bushes which clawed at her arms and legs. They stopped on a small ledge, and the young man turned to the sea. He started at it intently. His jaw muscles tightened.

Alia saw the wave sweeping across the shore toward the mountain. "Come on!" she screamed at the man, "we've got to climb higher, come on!" He ignored her and continued to stare at the wave. It began to slow down, diminishing in size. By the time it reached the foot of the mountain it was a feeble sight, lapping gently at the trees there and then retreating, until the ocean was again where it should be.

The man relaxed, leaning against a tree behind him. "I'm tired," he said. "It's hard to stop them by yourself."

She was puzzled. She remembered reading something about tidal waves and knew that this one had not behaved normally.

"Don't worry about it," the man went on. "Someone was just fooling around." He smiled at her, showing even white teeth. "It happens sometimes."

Alia loosened the straps on her knapsack, letting it fall to the ground. "You're going to get awfully sick, wandering around like this," said the young man. "Don't you think you should go back?"

"Go back to where?" she asked warily.

"You know where. Whatever institution you wandered out of. Didn't they tell you that you might get sick?"

"Yes. I don't know if I believe it any more." She watched the young man carefully. "I've walked a long way. I don't think I want to turn back just yet."

"But I'll take you back. I'm sure it's much nicer there than here. Wouldn't you agree?"

Alia thought of Tomas and Tamu and her life at the hospital, free from any demands. The older patients had been there for fifty years or more and seemed content; in fact, one old man had grown terrified of the thought that a vaccine might be found for the patients and they would be forced to leave. The doctors had to tell him that no one would be forced out, and everyone else had been as relieved as the old man.

"I suppose it is nicer," she said to the young man. "It's easier at least."

"Don't you miss all your friends? They'll be so happy to see you again."

"How would we get there?"

"Oh, it's easy, and it would be fun too. I'll show you." The young man started to climb the mountain. Alia followed him, dragging the

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knapsack. As she scrambled over some rocks, she noticed a huge red globe hovering above some trees on a ledge just above her. The young man reached out a hand, she grabbed it, and he pulled her up. She saw a huge balloon, bright red and attached to a large basketlike bottom. The young man had apparently tied it to one of the trees.

"We can go back in my balloon," the young man said, walking toward it.

"How?"

"It's simple. When we want to descend, all I have to do is pull this —" he pointed to a rope attached to the balloon — "and we land; it lets some air out. To go up, I just pour some sand out of one of those bags there." He grinned at her. "Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"Sure does."

"We can have a great time on the way back," said the young man. "Come on, let's go." He turned toward the balloon. Alia raised her arm quickly and chopped him on the back of the neck. He toppled forward with a soft moan and lay silent.

She quickly climbed into the basket, cut the rope holding the balloon down with her knife, and poured sand out of one of the bags. The balloon rose, grazing some treetops on the way. She was soon above the mountains and could see the desert on her right. The balloon hovered above the mountains, and she waited for it to start drifting.

"What now," she muttered. The vehicle was of no use to her if it stayed here. She felt a warm breeze on her face; then she began to move. The balloon drifted to the north. At least, she thought, it won't go back to the hospital.

Ahead, she noticed that the mountains had started to curve to her right, surrounding the desert. She moved further away from the sea and was soon over a thick green forest. She had left the desert behind.

Deer were leaping through the underbrush below her, waving their small white tails at the balloon. A slender river wound through the trees, and she could see two horses, black and chestnut, on its banks. A flock of crystalline birds, with feathers that were prisms, swam in the river. Alia, clinging to the side of the basket, gazed happily at the forest. It was worth it, she told herself, it was worth it for this.

Then she glimpsed something on the edge of the forest. She squinted as the balloon floated on and was able to discern large crystalline structures just beyond the wooded land. The crystals were green, gold, silver, blue and pink; some were spirals; others were slender towers. They glittered in the sunlight. As she came closer, she

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saw large golden insects buzzing softly in the sky over the crystal buildings. A city, she thought, and something jarred her mind.

Home, her mind whispered. *She was a child again. She stood in a garden while her mother made the roses grow.* She was over the city now and could see people moving through the streets on silver bands. A few people were floating over the city, apparently unsupported by anything. *Her father was giving a concert with his mind, and people gathered near the house to listen. Alia heard only silence and the rustle of leaves.* Silvery vines formed patterns on the sides of some of the crystals, wrapping themselves around the buildings, then unwinding and forming new patterns. There were parks scattered throughout the city with trees and ponds, and she could see children playing in them. *The other children wouldn't play with her. She could not float up to the treetops or make the thunder roar.* One of the golden insects passed near her, and she saw people inside it. They gazed at her through the transparent golden walls of the craft and waved.

Home. Bits and pieces cluttered her mind, traces of the memories she had lost. *I have a brother, with red-gold hair like mine, and he sometimes dances with me in the garden. My home is sapphire-blue. Once he made a cloud for me, and it rained on the flowers.* She tugged at the rope attached to the balloon and began her descent. *Father is composing. He listens to the universe, the stars and winds, and adds his own notes. They tell me it is beautiful. I can't hear it. He listens to other times. I can't hear them. He travels. I cannot follow.* The balloon fell slowly toward a sapphire spiral, then landed with a bump in a small garden behind it.

A tall blonde woman was in the garden gathering pink flowers. Near her stood a man with silver hair. They wore white robes and stared at her as she clambered over the side of the basket. The balloon bobbed uncertainly next to her.

The woman let go of the flowers and they fell in a pink mass at her feet. "Mother," Alia said softly. "Father."

Alia. The name was unspoken as it entered her mind. "Let me stay" she said, "don't send me away again, let me stay." She began to run to them, arms outstretched. The woman turned away. The man still watched her, but did not hold out is arms.

She was surrounded by a blue cloud, frozen, unable to move. *I'm sorry, Alia,* something in her mind whispered, *I'm sorry, please believe that.* Then, very slowly, she fell forward, almost floating, until the blue cloud turned black.

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Alia could hear a loud humming sound. She opened her eyes. She was rushing through an underground tunnel aboard a conveyance with transparent sides. The garden had disappeared. Around her, Alia could see only rock and an occasional flashing light. Someone had put her in a chair, and she struggled vainly at the straps which bound her to it.

Eta, the woman of the desert, sat in front of her, but she wore only a green robe and had removed her make-up. Next to Eta sat the young man from the beach and the old man who had guided her up the mountain. The young man was slouching in his chair, staring at the floor. The old man, also in a green robe, had trimmed his beard.

"What are you going to do with me?" asked Alia.

"You have to realize," said the young man, still looking at the floor, "that we are civilized. None of us has entered your mind; no one has since the time you were first taken to the hospital. It was necessary then, as you must know, but we haven't entered it since. If we had, you would be back at the hospital now and would never want to leave again. If I had, you could never have surprised me and stolen my balloon."

"We didn't think you'd get this far," said Eta. "You were timid when we placed you at that hospital. It seemed perfect for you. I didn't think you would become so adventurous."

"Take me home," she said. "Haven't I earned it? I know my mind is weak, but there must be a place for me. Ask my parents, they'll keep me, they have to."

The old man shook his head. "Would you want your parents to bear that?" he said softly. "They made the same decision everyone in their place has made."

"We tried to spare you all this," said the young man. "We tried to discourage you on your journey. We could have terrified you, driven you back with our minds, but that would have been wrong, using our minds like that against a helpless creature."

"Please take me home," she said. Her words seemed feeble. *On her last night at home, she sat sleepless in her room, trying desperately to raise her table with her mind, sobbing with frustration.*

"What would you have us do?" said the old man. "Structure our society around misfits and atavisms? Would you want to live with us, knowing that there was really nothing your poor mind could contribute? You can't shake the mountains or move the sea or bring meteors close to earth in showers of fire. You can't sail the clouds across the sky or make the spring come early out of the

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ground. You will never be free of the tyranny of time and space." The old man stood up and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I tell you this, even though you will forget. We do the best we can; we place you in environments that will make you happy. We prevent your suffering by removing memories of the past. Would it make you any happier if I told you that there are fewer of you now, that soon there will probably not be any?"

"Don't tell me all that," Alia said bitterly. She glared at the old man. "You have your own reasons for sending me away, I know that."

The old man sighed. "Yes, we do," he said. "Do you have any idea of the control we must exercise over ourselves in order to be certain that a momentary impulse isn't expressed outwardly by our minds? Helpless people such as you would be a constant temptation. You would be pawns which we could dominate, and you would make us cruel and decadent."

"That tidal wave," the young man muttered. "I couldn't resist the temptation. I was glad when I saw how terrified you were. Do you understand that? I never want to feel that way again."

"You'll be in a very nice place," said Eta.

"You'll be happy there," said the old man. "It's all arranged." Alia turned from him and looked out at the rocky walls rushing by them. They seemed to blur slightly as she watched.

I can't remember anything that happened to me before I came here, and neither can the others, or if they can they're not saying. The doctors tend to be a bit restrictive, but that's probably understandable. They don't want us traipsing around picking up all kinds of germs that might make us really sick. They wouldn't be too happy to know that Moro and I are on our way to the village.

Moro is skiing ahead of me. He slaloms along, then stops for a bit so I can catch up. I'm not as good a skier as Moro, and I have to go slowly. Moro has sneaked out of the hospital several times, and so has everyone else, I guess. The doctors don't make it too difficult, although they usually get annoyed if they find out.

It'll be my first time in the village. Already I can see it, just over the next slope, cottage roofs covered with inches of snow. Moro knows a tavern where they'll serve you without asking questions. The bartender there used to be at the hospital; I think most of the people in the village were once, but they're old now and were given permission to move.

Moro says that there's a city down at the bottom of the

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mountain, if you can call it a city. It's not much larger than the village up here. A few patients have been down there, but it's impossible to get to it in winter; you could never make it back up the mountain even if you got there. But Moro will take me in the spring, he's promised, and I'm looking forward to the trip. I don't like staying in the hospital all the time, but as long as I know I can go somewhere, I can stand it.

I manage to come to a stop near Moro without falling over. He is laughing, and there are crinkles on either side of his eyes. He kisses me on the cheek, and I begin to laugh too, stopping only to inhale some of the cold mountain air. I am falling in love with Moro, with his laughter and his talk and his sapphire-blue eyes. We will go to the tavern, and if I manage to acquire some courage with my beer, I may ask him to move into my room.

I think he will accept the offer.

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THE DOUBLE-ENDED CANDLE

The day after the President of the United States introduced the nation to the "energy crisis," that excellent writer, Barry N. Malzberg, sent me a letter in which he said, "Nixon's speech last night sounded like a brief extracted from one of your articles five to seven years ago and I want you to know that I thought of you all during it."

As it happens, I have been concerned with the limits of growth for many years, but did not usually emphasize the energy aspect of it. I spoke, instead, mainly of population growth, for that had within it, as inevitable consequences, all the deadly crises that now face us — not only a fuel shortage, but a general materials shortage, including food. It brings along with it the prospect of a shattered ecology, a poisoned biosphere, a raped planet, and a psychotic humanity.

The first occasion on which I actually converted my fears into a written essay was no less than sixteen years ago. I then wrote "Fecundity Limited," which appeared in the January 1958 issue of *Venture Science Fiction,* and was afterward included in my collection, *Is Anyone There?* (Doubleday, 1967).

Robert P. Mills, the editor of *Venture,* introduced my article as follows: "With the death rate

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Science

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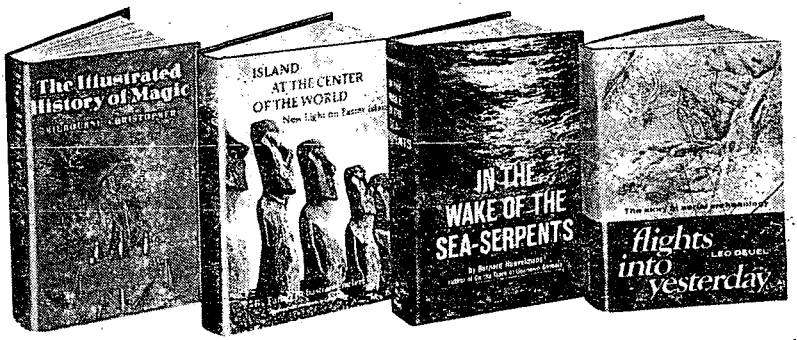
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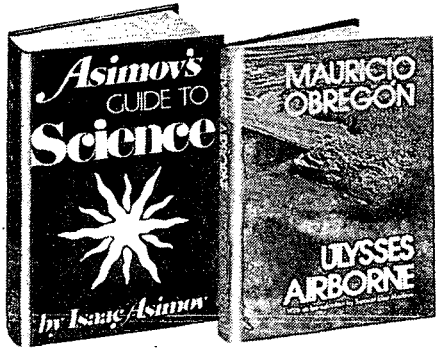

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declining and sex here to stay, mankind is increasing his numbers at what may be an insane rate. Dr. Asimov here examines some of the perils and problems we may soon face."

In this article, I went through the routine (which I have repeated on several occasions since) of calculating the consequences of a continuing population increase at the current rate, and demonstrating how soon — how dreadfully *soon* — it would surpass any reasonable limit that we can conceivably tolerate.

But that article was only 1300 words long, and I had no room to mention anything but population. When I began writing my articles for *F & SF*, I had three times the length at my disposal, and eventually I decided to rewrite the earlier article at greater length. The result was "The Power of Progression" which appeared in the May, 1969 *F & SF* and which was included in my collection *The Stars in Their Courses* (Doubleday, 1971).

I began that article by describing my own comfortable, middle-class, stodgy-compulsive-writer life and said: "What a pity, then, that it is all illusion and that I cannot blind myself to the truth. My island of comfort is but a quiet bubble in a torrent that is heaving its way downhill to utter catastrophe. I see nothing to stand in its way and can only watch in helpless horror."

Here again, I concentrated on population — the fundamental problem out of which all else rises. However, in this article, which was 4200 words long, I had space at least to mention some of the consequences. I said.

"What about resources? Already, with a population of 3.5 billion and the present level of technology, we are eroding our soil, spreading our minerals thin, destroying our forests, and consuming irreplaceable coal and oil at a fearful rate."

I went into still more detail in an article I wrote entitled "The End," which appeared in the January 1971 issue of *Penthouse* and which was included in the collection *Today and Tomorrow and* — (Doubleday, 1973). Here is what I said there:

"There is the matter of energy, for instance. Mankind has been using energy at a greater and greater rate throughout his existence. . .

"At the present moment, the total rate of energy utilization by mankind is doubling every fifteen years, and we might reasonably ask how long that can continue.

"Mankind is currently using energy, it is estimated, at the rate of 20,000,000,000,000,000,000 (twenty billion billion) calories per year. To avoid dealing with too many zeros, we can define this quantity as one

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'annual energy unit' and abbreviate that as AEU. In other words, we will say that mankind is using energy, now, at the rate of 1 AEU a year. Allowing a doubling every fifteen years ... you can calculate the rate of energy utilization in any given year and the total utilization up to that year.

"Right now, the major portion of our energy comes from the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas) which have been gradually formed over hundreds of millions of years. There is a fixed quantity of these and they cannot be re-formed in any reasonable time.

"The total quantity of fossil fuels thought to be stored in the Earth's crust will liberate about 7500 AEU when burned. Not all that quantity of fuel can be dug or drilled out of the Earth. Some of it is so deep or so widely dispersed that more energy must be expended to get it than would be obtained from it. We might estimate the energy of the recoverable fossil fuels to be about 1000 AEU.

"If the 1000 AEU of fossil fuels is all we will have as an energy source, then, at the present increase of energy utilization, we will have used it up completely in 135 years."

But of course, the discussion in "The End" took up the matter of fossil fuels in general. What about oil, specifically? In a small book I wrote in July, 1973 for the Atomic Energy Commission (it is not yet published) I discussed oil, or petroleum, in particular and said:

". . .the growing dependence on super-convenient petroleum comes at a price. There is a considerably smaller supply of petroleum on Earth than there is of coal. At the present rate of use, the world's supply of petroleum may be scraping bottom in half a century at most.

"There is another complication in the fact that petroleum is not nearly as evenly distributed as coal is, and most of the industrial nations have become petroleum-importers and are economically dependent on the producing nations. The United States, for instance, has 10 percent of the total petroleum reserves of the world in its own territory and has been a major producer for decades. Its enormous and steadily growing consumption of petroleum, however, has outstripped its production capacity and made it an importer. . .

"Nearly three-fifths of all known petroleum reserves on Earth are to be found in the territory of the various Arabic-speaking countries. Kuwait, for instance, which is a small nation at the head of the Persian Gulf, with an area only three-fourths that of Massachusetts, and a population of about half a million, has petroleum reserves twice as great as those of the entire United States."

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And so for sixteen years, then, I have been writing — and lecturing — on the dangers of carelessly and continually expanding our numbers and our rate of energy use. It meant that I was lumped into the category of the "doom-criers" and was shrugged aside by many as someone without faith in the ability of mankind to solve its problems.

That didn't bother me. I was quite certain I was right* and that I must therefore continue to sound the warning, no matter what.

And then, all of a sudden, in November 1973, the "energy crisis" was upon us. Out of nowhere, out of a blue sky it seemed, we were suddenly facing disaster.

How did all this happen so quickly? From where did it come? To be sure, in mid-October, the fourth war between Israel and the Arab nations broke out, and the United States supported Israel so that the Arabs declared a boycott of oil shipments to the United States. But that meant a total cut in our energy supply of only 6 percent. Was that enough of a reason to go into so deep a tailspin? Or is there something more?

And if there is something more, can it be that no one knew? Can it be that the energy crunch caught the leaders of this nation by surprise?

Nonsense! After all, *I* knew, and I didn't invent any figures. I didn't get them out of some arcane research methods of my own. I picked them up out of the public prints, out of readily-available books, out of the essays I found in magazines and newspapers. If I could do it, anyone could do it.

The only conclusion I can come to is that many people in authority in both government and industry knew this was coming, but they didn't do anything and they didn't say anything. Why?

I have a theory about that if you're willing to listen. Just a theory, you understand, which, I am sure, is an over-simplification, but —

In the course of the first half of the twentieth century, the United States made the shift from coal to oil. In 1900, the energy derived from burning petroleum in the United States was only 4 percent that derived from burning coal. By the time World War II was over, we were getting more of our energy from oil and natural gas, than from coal, with the balance shifting farther in favor of oil and gas each year.

Oil, being liquid, is much more convenient to mine, transport, and use than coal is. The switch to oil in the United States meant that energy was

**If you are aching to tell me that there are other energy sources besides oil, and even besides fossil fuels generally, the answer is that I know, I know. I will take up that matter next month.*

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much more easily available. Electricity poured out of the nation's generators in an endlessly increasing stream, and we began to live in a world in which all the controls were at our finger-tips, so to speak.

And why not? The real size of the pools of oil underlaying the Middle East only became known after World War II, and we all received the impression of a hitherto-unknown ocean of oil ready for the taking. For a few hearty years, we used all we wanted, more and more and more, and it seemed to us that the supply was so great that we could postpone thoughts of a possible end to the some indefinite future. Let our grandchildren worry — and suffer.

The average American, I am sure, didn't think of an end at all. To him, electricity was just something you got out of a plug in the wall. But what about the leaders of our nation and of our economy? Did they also think that the glorious years would last forever?

How is it conceivable they could? They *had* to know, but for some reason they had to keep quiet.

What could it be? Was there anything else that took place immediately after World War II in addition to the conversion of the nation to an economy based on endless oil burning? There was the Cold War. How about that?

From 1945 onward, the United States was in stern competition with the Soviet Union, in a battle that did not make use of bombs and guns and planes and tanks. It was a battle just the same, with the whole world as the arena and the whole world as the prize. And since the weapons used were not of the military variety, they had to be political, economic, and psychological.

To those of us who, like myself, believe in the vision of America as presented by such men as Jefferson and Lincoln, it would seem that the great weapon of the United States was its freedom, its civil liberty, its absence of repression. Who, comparing the open society of the United States, with the tightly-controlled centralized socialism of the Soviet bloc could possibly choose, voluntarily, the latter.

It was not the weapon of Liberty, however, that the United States chose to use. Unfortunately, most people in the United States in the aftermath of World War II seemed highly suspicious of those among us who spoke too earnestly of Liberty. The mood was eventually seized on by Senator Joseph P. McCarthy, and was carried by him to a peak that brought disaster to him and to the nation. We can therefore call it "McCarthyism."

Thanks to McCarthyism, it became possible, for instance, to circulate

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the Bill of Rights, word for word, in the form of a petition, and find that almost no one would sign it. Some would think that the words of the Bill of Rights represented dangerous communistic propaganda, and others thought that signing any petition at all was a communistic act.

So we threw away the weapon of Liberty and took up, instead, one which we can call Affluence.

We were the richest nation on Earth, the one with the most advanced technology. We could supply loans and credits and did, and we knew the Soviet Union could not match us in that. We could supply technological knowhow and did, and we could not be matched in that either. What's more, we supplied this all to our friends and allies and denied it to our enemies and competitors; and made our doing so perfectly clear for it was the *selectivity* of our aid that was our weapon.*

Our weapon of Affluence worked at first, for the Soviet Union could not, in actual fact, match us. By means of the Marshall Plan and through foreign aid of all sorts, we rebuilt western Europe and Japan, and we made the governments (if not always the people) of many underdeveloped nations comfortable.

So all of them became firm allies of ours, and all through the 1950s, the United Nations delivered enormous majorities in favor of those positions supported by the United States. In fact, the Soviet Union had the votes only of itself and of those few nations it dominated, and could only save itself from utter diplomatic defeat by the continual use of the veto.

But there is a difference between the weapons of Liberty and of Affluence.

Liberty is an absolute. It is not just the fact that you have *more* Liberty that counts; Liberty itself is enough. If the Soviet Union tried to counter such a weapon by developing Liberty of its own then we would have won the Cold War, for the whole purpose of the Cold War was to see to it that the world would follow our system of government rather than that of the Soviet Union.

Affluence, on the other hand, is only relative. It was not important that we were Affluent; only that we were more Affluent than anyone else, and particularly that we were more Affluent than the Soviet Union. If the Soviet Union gained our Affluence without adopting our Liberty, than we

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**It was this use of our technology resource as an instrument of foreign policy that makes it impossible for us to object today to the Arab use of their oil resource as an instrument of their foreign policy. The Arabs are perfectly frank in saying that they are merely following the example we set them.*

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would have lost the Cold War by losing our weapon.

It was that, I think, that created the absolute panic in the United States when the Soviet Union lofted Sputnik I into orbit on October 4, 1957. In itself, the feat was not damaging to us, but the world could not be allowed to think that the Soviet Union had outclassed American technology and was en route to an Affluence like ours or greater. Let the world think that and we would have lost the Cold War.

As a result, everything went into high gear and we grew determined to leap-frog the Soviet Union and reach the Moon first. Of course we did, and the Cold War was not lost — at least not because of events in space.

But observe — If the United States depended on superiority in Affluence to win the leadership of the world, it could scarcely limit the rate at which energy was used by its citizens. On the contrary, it had to encourage it, and Americans generally leaped at the chance.

Partly, the drive for greater energy use was a natural consequence of our history. The United States grew up in an environment of an endless frontier, endless development, endless growth. It was hard to realize that there had to come an end to endlessness and that it had, in fact, come.

Add to this the natural consequence of an unregulated economy (Liberty has its price). The companies that sold oil and electricity to the nation naturally plunged for the short-term profits involved in encouraging the ever-greater use of energy regardless of the long-term difficulties that entailed. Ditto, ditto, the automobile companies.

But the public might have been educated and the various companies brought to heel, were it not for the fact that Affluence was so important a part of our foreign policy.

We deliberately built up West Berlin, for instance, as a showpiece of wealth in order that it might contrast with the stark dilapidation of East Berlin, knowing that the Soviet Union could not conveniently match us, dollar for dollar. And it worked, for East Germany had to build a wall around West Berlin in the end, to hide the temptation and lure from its citizens and to close an easy route of escape for those who succumbed to that temptation and lure.

Could we, then, spoil our successes by asking our own citizens to practice thrift and caution in accelerating the growth of our Affluence? In fact, so closely was our economic organization tied to endless growth that any halt in that growth, even a slowing down, would produce a recession.

So on we went to jet-planes, and color television, and self-defrosting

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refrigerators, and self-cleaning ovens, and automobiles that powered every moving part, and buildings that were heated to 80° in winter and cooled to 60° in summer — and always, and in every case, at the cost of a further acceleration in energy use.

We developed a higher and higher energy-rate economy and way of life. Between the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1970s, we lived through an amazing quarter-century. The population of the United States increased by 1½ times, while the rate of energy use went up 3 times. Every one of the 210,000,000 Americans today uses, on the average, twice as much energy as did the 140,000,000 Americans of yesterday.

In 1920, Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote:

"My candle burns at both ends
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends —
It gives a lovely light."

Well, from 1945 to 1973, the United States burnt its candle at both ends, and it *did* give a lovely light. But surely, we could have foreseen that it would not last the night.

In that period of time, during which our rate of energy-use tripled, we went from being an oil-exporting nation to an oil-importing nation. And we had to import oil in competition with Japan and the West European nations all of whom we had helped to Affluence of their own.

It became harder and harder to maintain a favorable balance of trade, and the dollar weakened, particularly with respect to the West German mark and the Japanese yen. (The thing was we barred the defeated Germans and Japanese from wasting their money on supporting a military machine. We were determined to waste enough of our own money to support enough of a military machine to defend them as well as ourselves. Then, too, we developed the military machine itself into a higher and higher energy-using device so that it became a more and more Affluent object even in peace-time.)

Yet, as the hole we were digging for ourselves became more and more apparent throughout the 1960s, we could still do nothing to conserve our position by controlling our rate of energy use. Our foreign policy and the public devotion to the energy-rich way of life made it impossible for any political leader to advocate energy control.

Failing such energy control, it would have made good sense either to keep the Arab nations in subjection or to cultivate them as friends. We did neither. Why not? Partly, of course, it was because we were committed to

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supporting Israel, but this was by no means the full explanation. The fact is that during the crucial decade of the 1960s, the United States had its attention diverted by our greatest folly since the Civil War.

The period of McCarthyism had convinced the American people that we had "lost China" through treason in high places. That made it politically impossible for any American President to "lose" any other region, even when it would have benfited us to abandon areas of minimal importance in order to conserve our strength for crucial points.

After World War II, the United States adopted the principle of no retreat, anywhere; something like that which Hitler had used in World War II, and with the same results. We wasted our strength on useless struggles in positions chosen by our adversaries. We fought in Korea to a draw at worst, and then we fought in Vietnam to a draw at best.

The Vietnam War occupied us for twelve years for *nothing*. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong are stronger today than they were when we started.

What's more, the wars we fought in the 1950s and 1960s were high-energy wars as befitted our new American way of life. American soliders never walked, they helicoptered; they ate and lived in as much luxury as we could manage. Naturally, it is hard to begrudge them this, but consider —

During the Korean War, we used to complain about the Chinese "hordes" who attacked our men. When we were pushed back, we insisted, it was only by overwhelming numbers.

But it is not only numbers that can overwhelm. We attacked our Asian enemies with "hordes" of energy, and when the enemy fell back they might justly have claimed to do so before overwhelming calories. And the fact is that in the last analysis they could afford the men better than we could afford the calories (short of nuclear weapons which, out of regard for world opinion, we dared not use), and we had to pull out short of victory.

So while our Presidents dared not "lose" Korea or Vietnam, and dared not "be the first President of the United States to lose a war," we lost the Middle East and the Cold War. How could we take strong stands against Soviet domination of the Middle East when, throughout the 1960s, our eyes were fixed entirely on Vietnam — despite the fact that nowhere in the world could one find an area of comparable size that is farther from us and less important to our welfare? And how can we take strong action now that we are out of Vietnam, when the memory of that traumatic war prevents us taking such strong action anywhere.

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No, the price of Vietnam for the 1970s was that China had become strong enough to enter the United Nations to the triumphant applause of delegates from all over the world, including many who had profited from our policy of Affluence. And furthermore, the Soviet Union had become strong enough militarily, economically, and diplomatically, to force us into an attitude of detente rather than opposition. Yet with all this, we *still* dared not puncture our energy-wasting economy.

Our cities were beginning to experience brownouts at every heat wave and cold wave, but the oil companies, intent on their short-term profits, were content to blame this on the conservationists, those few wicked people who wanted clean air. The fact that the oil companies had encouraged an energy-wasting economy for profits, and that the government had done so for the sake of a foreign policy that did not work was never mentioned.

Even our high-energy military machine was beginning to suffer. It was so incredibly wasteful of energy that we were having difficulty keeping it up to snuff even under peacetime conditions. Nuclear wars could not be fought because that was suicide; and the fact is that non-nuclear wars could not be fought, either, because they are too expensive. The Vietnam War had strained us dangerously, and we could scarcely find a smaller enemy than North Vietnam. Yet *still* through the summer of 1973, we dared not do anything about our arrow-straight flight to catastrophe.

Then, in October, 1973, came the Arab boycott and a 6 percent reduction of our energy supply. It was enough. At last, at last, at last the government could say "crisis" with no blame attached to itself.

Suddenly — overnight — the United States bloomed into a gasoline shortage, a fuel oil shortage, a paper shortage, a plastics shortage, an adhesives shortage, a shortage, in short, of everything but shortages.

The only way of understanding this is to remember that the energy crisis was there all along. The Arab boycott did not cause it; it only made it possible to stop faking its absence.

The Arabs did us a favor, then. They have made it possible for us to tackle the problem now when, perhaps, it is not too late. The danger we really face is that the Arabs will relent and offer us oil and that we will be fools enough to take it and go back to burning our candle at both ends — and prepare for ourselves a far worse catastrophe ten years hence.

But assuming we have learned our lesson, however unwillingly, and that we now know that energy is a resource to be used carefully — what do we do now? I'll consider that situation next month.

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Leonard Tushnet, whose first F&SF story appeared just 10 years ago, died on November 28, 1973. Dr. Tushnet was a physician who had a general practice in New Jersey until he turned to writing in the mid-sixties. He probably never thought of himself as an sf writer, but he brought a fresh point of view to this field and always told a good, unaffected story. We will miss him.

In the World of Magic

by LEONARD TUSHNET

I got the idea from an advertisement: "To reach the Magic Kingdom, call your travel agent." That didn't mean *our* Magic Kingdom; it meant that travesty of it known as Disney World. But the slogan started me thinking.

I was a local recruiter. Recruiting is practically nil these past hundred years. The United States was never a good source at its best, but still we got adult believers here and there over the years, mainly from lunatic asylums. No more. Patients are either on drugs or having various forms of psychosurgery "to straighten out their thinking." We used to get some changelings, too, but nowadays babies are born in hospitals, and those few that aren't are always under the eyes of their kinfolk. The kids don't read fairy tales any more; they watch TV. When it comes to zero population growth, we're it. We're minus population growth here in the States. And it's no better in the rest of the world.

How bad conditions were we heard at the international meeting last Hallowe'en. The Chief Gremlin, despite the glowing report he gave on how effective gremlins were in the developing computer technology, had to admit, nevertheless, that the fouling of things up was being attributed to what the engineers called Murphy's Law: "If anything can go wrong, it will." That law substituted science for faith, with the result that many gremlins had disappeared through sheer desuetude.

The situation was worse elsewhere. Fungicides and weed killers had eliminated the fairy rings in England. The Irish hadn't seen a leprechaun since the establishment of the republic. In Scandinavia the trolls languished under the bridges because even in the country

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districts motor vehicles had done away with pedestrian traffic. In the Soviet Union, Krylov's fables, taught as classic literature, turned off in boredom the generations coming up. German kobolds were displaced by industrial mining. Djinns passed away with the advent of the pan-Arab nationalism that aped the worst features of Western culture. Brownies had disappeared in the face of labor-saving household devices. In Iran the Shah's new schools taught that peris were superstions of the ignorant, unworthy of the educated. Hobgoblins were driven away as swamps and marshlands were drained.

We had hoped that LSD and the rising interest in the occult would be of help to us. We were wrong. The LSD users were self-centered, so intent on expanding their minds that they never thought of us. And those occultists who didn't get lost in yoga foundered in satanism, astrology, and I-Ching cards or started their own pseudomythology to attract followers to support them in luxury.

We had nothing to lose and much to gain by trying a novel mode of recruitment. If we couldn't lick so-called progress, we had to bend its methods to our use. I communicated my proposal to Queen Mab, the Zhar Ptitsa, and Morgan le Fay. I got the go-head.

I went about my task systematically. I picked out a store in a low-rent district near a housing project where there were plenty of children. I put in a lot of travel folders describing the wonders of Never-Never Land, Oz, and the Other World. I hung colorful posters of Cinderella's Ball, Rumpelstiltskin and the Miller's Daughter, and the Sleeping Beauty. On the windows I put up big signs: *Send your Kids to the Magic World! An Unusual Experience Every Child Should Have! Special Reduced Rates!*

Of course the rates were cheap. As a matter of fact, I didn't have to charge anything at all. But if the trip were free, no one would have gone. Parents would have thought there was a catch in it somewhere. People, especially poor people, are very suspicious.

Inquiries came immediately. "What airline do you use? ... Do the kids stay in cabins or tents?...Is there a pool? ...How much do the hidden extras come to?...Do you have adequate medical supervision?"

I gave the mamas and papas the travel folders and described the wonders of the trip. "The children take the Magic Carpet from our own private airport. No worry about getting to Kennedy or La Guardia, and no expense. A bus picks the children up right here and

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takes them to the airport. They stay at Bluebeard's Castle. The service is out of this world, under the expert direction of Miss Mary Poppins. The children can splash in the Fountain of Youth or ride on dolphins if they like water. Meals are included in the cost of the package. The kids'll love the fabulous desserts: blackbird pie, Christmas plum pie, and the special Billy Boy's cherry pies. They'll have a grand time with the Three Bears, the Three Little Pigs, and Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, not to mention other characters. There's a marvelous zoo with animals right out of Dr. Doolittle and Dr. Seuss..."

Some of the parents were hesitant. They asked about the qualifications of the counselors. I resolved their doubts by having them interview a few girls from Titania's court in their tutus; the mothers loved the idea of their darlings getting ballet lessons at no extra charge. The fathers were pleased on seeing those Captain Hook's pirates I had for the boys.

Thirty-three, the full quota, signed up. We left on Midsummer Eve. The boys and girls, carrying their suitcases, lined up to get on the Parnassus bus. Most of them were giggly; a few had tears in their eyes when they kissed their parents good-by. The air was full of last-minute advice. "Don't forget what I told you about washing behind your ears!...Remember it's not nice to pick your nose in public!...Make sure you flush the toilet when you go!...Bring daddy back a little souvenir!...If you go on a hike, put on shoes, not sneakers!...Drink all your milk!... Don't use up all your spending money the first day!...Call us up collect if you get homesick. The counselor will tell you how...Have a good time, sweetie!....Good-by, honey, good-by!....Good-by, good-by!"

The kids chattered and sang songs in the bus. I sat next to the driver, where I could keep an eye on him. He was Phaeton, the only one available who could handle a vehicle. He was a show-off; so every time he started to speed up or get careless with the white lines, I pointed to the sun, still not setting, it being daylight-saving time.

Twilight lowered over our stopping place at Sleepy Hollow. That's when I should have called the whole thing off. The children got out of the bus and looked around. I tried to herd them onto the Magic Carpet, but they balked. "Where's the airplane?...I thought we were going on a 747!... Where's the control tower?...Where are the other planes?...I'm not going on no propeller job! My father paid for a jet!" I made all sorts of excuses, cajoled them, and finally got them

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seated on the Magic Carpet.

It rose quickly, and in the twinkling of an eye we were in Fairyland. I expected them to be amazed at the speed of our travel, but all I heard was grumbling. "Too fast. I couldn't see anything... No seat belts or nothing...I didn't have a chance to see how the toilet works...We didn't get anything to eat on the ride."

Do you think they ooh-ed and ah-ed at their first sight of Fairyland? Not on your life! The hazy golden sunlight, the terraced gardens, the vivid flowers, the castles and the turrets, the fairies themselves, floating over their heads, fluttering their iridescent wings — nothing impressed them. "What is this? A movie set?... Where are the rides?" And above all, "When do we eat?"

My carefully prepared reception fell flat. So did Peter Pan and Tinker Bell, bowled over by the rush of kids to the picnic tables set up in the outer courtyard. For a moment I toyed with the idea of calling the Old Shoe Woman, but only for a moment. I realized that the children had to get acclimatized, so to speak. After all, the purpose of our having them was to propagandize them, to show them the wonders of imagination, to awaken them to the glories of fantasy, to have them believe in us. Otherwise, they would grow up hard-headed pragmatists, and we would wither away in the gloom of skepticism and modern "relevant" pedagogy.

I admit my patience was sorely tried. They complained about the ambrosia and nectar we served them. "No soda pop?...No hamburgers?...No hot dogs?...No ice cream?" The evening's entertainment board them. They hissed Ariel and applauded Caliban at the wrong times. They groaned at the March of the Wooden Soldiers and at the Nutcracker. I was glad at last when the Sandman came around.

"Maybe they were overtired and nervous from the trip," said the Fairy with the Blue Hair. "What are your plans for tomorrow?"

"A general tour," I answered. "Down the Rabbit Hole, through the Looking Glass, Ali Baba's Cave, the Gingerbread House."

The Fairy with the Blue Hair nodded. "That should be fun for them. And at the end let them play with the Cloak of Invisibility. That'll be even more fun."

Tastes in fun have changed. The children liked the thrill of falling down the Rabbit Hole but refused to walk through the tunnels. "Were are the cars?" they asked. They sneered at the chess pieces and trampled on the rose garden. They overturned and broke the jars in the Cave. At the Gingerbread House they said the

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shingles were too spicy, the peppermint columns too sweet, and the rock-sugar windows too hard to eat. The first boy to put on the Cloak of Invisibility began to lift the girls' skirts. The girls squealed and tittered. I had quite a time getting it off him. Day Two was a flop. Every minute I was plagued with "Where are the rides?...Don't we go swimming?...Where are the cowboys and Indians?...Where's Donald Duck?...Where's Mickey Mouse?...And Superman."

I was flexible. If they wanted rides, I'd give them rides. The third day we divided them into four rotating groups: one each for the Enchanted Swans, the Storks, Pegasus, and the Cockhorse. I didn't see them until evening. "How did you like the rides?" I asked them.

"Big deal! Coney Island's got better!...No Ferris wheel!...No merry-go-round!...No crack-the-whip!...Dumb birds just flying all around and going nowhere!...And the ones on the lake! They were for the birds, ha-ha!...That stupid horse went flying instead of galloping like he should!" No one got to Banbury Cross because no one mounted the Cockhorse. "That's for babies!"

Next day was for water sports, the prospect of which delighted the children. We went to Swan Lake. They watched Undine for a while before they began using her as a target for pebbles they picked up. They paid no attention to the Water-Babies. I overheard one girl saying to another, "So what if they're living underwater? They're little babies, and you know what they showed us in sex education class — all little babies live in a big water bubble inside of their mothers' bellies before they get borned." They firmly objected to going into the water nude. "My mother told me never, never, never to let anybody see me...My father warned me about people who fool around little boys...Boys and girls can't be naked together! That's dirty!" I gave in. The boys wore wee, wee trunks and the girls even tinier bikinis. They were wild in the water, scaring the Kraken and pulling the mermaids' hair. They seemed to be having a good time, but I still heard complaints. "No sand. How can we build if there's no sand?...I'm laying here two hours already and my skin's the same. My mother'll whale me if I come home without a tan...They don't have any big water toys...Or plastic beach balls...Or waves for jumping."

Meals were a constant headache. The kids drank the Purple Cow's milk readily enough, but they turned up their noses at the other varieties of food provided. They ate grudgingly of the pickled

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peppers, the gentlemen's eggs, and the curds and whey. They clamored for what we didn't have: potato chips, fudgicles, and cokes.

I had planned that the fifth day was to be unorganized. The children could wander around freely and do what they wanted. Always a fairy or two would be at their sides to tell them stories or play hide-and-seek or other games with them. After breakfast (of Captain Jenks's pork and beans, which they wolfed down with appetite, more so than with the Mama Bear's porridge which they had had up to now), when I told the children they had a free day, a babble broke out.

"Where's the TV? If there's nothing to do, I want to see cartoons...That's not fair! My mommy and daddy are paying for me to have a good time, and you're supposed to provide entertainment!...I want to buy things. Where's the five-and-ten?" Some children started weeping. The thought of a day on their own frightened them. They were accustomed to being directed. A few boys came to me asking for bats and balls. Several girls grabbed a fairy and tried to pull off her gauzy wings. I sensed the spreading hysteria and announced a quick change of plan. During the early part of the day the elves would take the boys for a hike in the woods and the pixies would teach the girls twirling. Loud applause. In the afternoon, we'd have a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Groans. In the evening we'd have fireworks, with an extraordinary demonstration of fire eating by Loki. Cheers. Only a couple of voices called out, "Don't we ever get to see any movies?"

It was a wonderful day. Everyone seemed to be enjoying himself and herself. Only two incidents. One of the boys snitched Aladdin's Lamp and dented it by kicking it around. A girl amused herself by catching will-o'-the-wisps in a bottle.

Everyone (on the staff, that is) congratulated me. They were eager to see what the next day would bring, when the boys and girls would be given a brief span of time to use magical powers. Once they'd have such an experience, they'd never forget it. We had high hopes.

Alas! All went awry. The depravity of those children cannot be imagined. The weavers of dreams wove tales of violence, blood, and murder so horrendous that even Jack's Giant shuddered. The painters of illusion painted pornography, puerile of course because they were only children, but pornography nevertheless. The jumpers and climbers and levitators pelted those on the ground with coconuts and breadfruit. The

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growers grew monstrous hybrids. The theranthropes fought each other with fang and claw. Despite the lecture before the powers were endowed, pointing out that magic should by preference be beneficent and, if not that, at least mirth-provoking, never malicious, the children used their powers to torment others as no witch would dare to.

The witch situation caused the most trouble. As soon as the first one appeared, all the kids wanted to become witches. The first one was a clever girl. She taught the others the abracadabra, and — behold! — the sky was full of witches riding brooms. They looped-the-loop, they tried to topple each other, they yanked at cloaks, they knocked off peaked hats. I had to call for help from Grimalkin. The deveil-cats sprang into the air. Each seized a witch and spat at her, transforming her back into a little child with amnesia for the charm.

The Fairy Godmother laughed at my long face that night. "Don't worry," she said. "Those kids have learned a lot in the past six days. We'll all be as real to them from now on as their playmates."

"I hope so," I said. "I hope so."

The last morning we had Momus and Comus tell stories. Very unsuccessful. Lots of yawning during the first story. The second was interrupted by a little boy who got up and said, "That's all garbage. I can tell a better story." He could, judging from the applause when he finished an involved tale about the battle between the Mafia and a gang trying to muscle in on the drug traffic. I called off the storytelling.

After lunch we had a treasure hunt. We arranged for everyone to find something of value: for the girls tiny glass slippers, a gold ring, a silken scarf, or a cameo brooch; for the boys a little silver hammer, a jewel-encrusted spinning top, fancy leather gloves, or an opalescent hoop. The kids had a ball. No trouble, no complaints at all. Their eyes glowed as they carefully stowed away their finds in their pockets and purses. Then came the final game — following the rainbow. They ran and they leaped through the fields of daffodils and tulips, over hill and dale, until they reached the pot of gold. I watched benignly at first while they tried to empty its inexhaustible store of gold pieces. Then I got worried. They were throwing away their precious gifts for the worthless gold. I called out to them, "Children, that's only fairy gold!" but they paid no attention to me. They kept on scrambling for the gold. All except two, a girl and a boy. The boy, brown-haired and dark-skinned, stood dreamily

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fingering his silver hammer. The girl, whose dull expression had set her apart from the others at the beginning, fuddled with the gold ring on her finger; her eyes were starry as she mumbled.

Time was up. The children, so ladden with the gold pieces they could hardly walk, staggered off to where their suitcases were already waiting on the Magic Carpet. The Sandman came. We started off and in a twinkling of an eye were at the Hayden Planetarium. There I harnessed a comet, and we rode back on its tail to the travel agency office, arriving there just at dawn and just before the first parents arrived. I told the children to wait on the sidewalk and went inside. I locked the door and pulled down the window shades. I left the transom open and perched there invisibly so that I could see and hear what the children would tell their parents.

I shouldn't have. The parents scolded the kids for bringing back so many dried leaves in their pockets. ("I told them it was fairy gold!" I whispered.) The children shrieked at their parents for sending them "to such a dumb place. A lot of actors and actresses all dressed up like clowns and no space rockets and no submarines and no real airplanes, not even a helicopter!" My heart sank. "...The food was awful, Mama! Can I have spaghetti for lunch?... They kept showing us magic tricks like in assembly in school until we got tired of them...No death ray guns...No Western acts. No rodeos...No horseback rides like they promised...I'm so hungry! Will you make me a peanut butter-and-jelly sandwich when we get home, please, Mommy?...We didn't have ice cream once, not even snowballs!...When we went on a hike, I was frightened by all the wild animals roaming around, even a big wolf with terrible sharp teeth!...Bending sticks instead of batons like the high-school girls have!...A fake treasure hunt!...Can I have a chocolate malted on the way home, Daddy?" And very softly in their parents' ears, "Girls wearing only short slips you could see right through!...Boys with such tight body suits I had to blush!"

The papas consoled their disappointed daughters; the mothers gathered their frustrated boys to their bosoms. "I'm going to call Bess Meyerson," one woman said. "I paid out good money to that crook!" Another cried out, "The Action Reporter on Channel 5! He'll do something fast:" A man growled, "The kids thought they'd get a real kick out of this trip, but it was like everything else — hokum." And his neighbor, hugging his son and daughter to him, muttered, "A guy that'd take advantage of little

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kids like that ought to be lynched!"

Only the boy with the silver hammer and the girl with the gold ring seemed happy. The girl, her mouth drooling as she sang a nonsense song, walked home hand in hand with her mother, who wept all the way down the block. The boy stumbled after his father, who looked despairingly at him when he failed to answer his questions, being lost in his thoughts.

When I got back I took a look into Merlin's Mirror of the Future. The little girl was a young woman rocking in a chair in an institution, smiling vacantly into the distance. Only when she fingered the gold ring hung like a locket on a piece of string around her neck, did stars appear in her eyes. The little boy was a poet breaking his heart strings for the unlistening ears of a workaday world.

I resigned as recruiter.

Coming next month

Something truly special for July, an unusual novella in which an old friend, Brigadier Donald Ffellowes, returns — but this time the Brigadier's tale concerns Ffellowes' father! The story takes place in the Fall of 1881, on the island of Sumatra. The senior Ffellowes and a mysterious companion are confronted with a monstrous adversary in the form of giant, rodent-like creatures ... Need more be said?

Don't miss "A Father's Tale" by Sterling E. Lanier, in the July F&SF.

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Academic Note: Dick Lupoff writes that he is teaching a course in sf — as part of the extension program for inmates at San Quentin. "Every Tuesday I go through the metal detector, submit my briefcase for inspection, and wind up Inside with a room full of maximum security felons." Which may or may not have given him the idea for this story about a clossal con.

Whatever Happened to Nick Neptune?

by RICHARD A. LUPOFF

The Times-Gazette
Publishing Company
New Fremont, Ganymede
478365742
(Successor to the Times-Gazette,
Fremont, Harding County, Ohio)

Mr. Stuart Bartleby-Ames
Ames Rare Books & Magazines
315 South Fourth Avenue
New Central City, Europa
527736598

Dear Mr. Bartleby-Ames:

You have to give the government credit for saving as much as they did. I mean, to anticipate the attack the way they did, to terraform the Jovian moons the way they did — and in secret at that! — and have everything ready for the move before war actually broke out, it was amazing. Truly amazing.

Only the power elite, if you don't mind my using that kind of language, knew when the attack was coming. How they knew, they never let on. Planetary security. How they knew the enemy had put all his effort into a single planetbuster just dumfounds me. But they did.

They knew it couldn't be stopped, so they just launched their own counterattack and got as much of the populace out of the path of the coming holocaust as they could. That was pretty nearly everybody. A few got left behind, and lord knows if any of them survived the planetbuster. A few more decades and we'll be able to visit Earth again, and we'll find out.

But here on Ganymede — and there on Europa where you've got your shop, and on Io and Callisto too — we're just about set. All the trappings of civilization: inane television shows, the National Football League, geisha houses, everything.

They tell us that the counterattack plan wiped out the enemy, so

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the war's over, and out here on the moons we're back to something astoundingly like business as usual.

Even the publication of small-town weekly newspapers.

I'm as amazed as the next fellow, I'll grant you that, but here we are. And I don't suppose I'm going to tell you anything new about recent history, but I think I can make you a proposition that will yield a tidy profit for each of us.

Here's my story:

First of all, let me clear up a little mystery. All this time people have been wondering who in the world Nick Neptune *was* — a *nom de plume,* a sort of collective front for a group of shadowy figures, even a real person.

Who was Nick Neptune? *I was.* Yes, I was Nick Neptune. "Nick" never existed, never drew a breath of air except as I used the name. I was Nick and Nick was me and I was, yes, the editor of *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine* for its entire run of one edition.

My real name is Sanford Hall, and I've lived in the little town of Fremont — New Fremont, Ganymede, since the evacuation and Fremont, Ohio, before — man and boy. I've worked all of my life, except for four years out of state attending college, for the town weekly, the *Times-Gazette.*

During those four years I made the acquaintance of Herman Minkowsky — whose name you ought to remember, he was one of the key figures in the whole Nick Neptune affair — and after I earned my degree in journalism and returned to the original Fremont, Earth, old Fred Callister, the editor and publisher of the *Times-Gazette,* handed me the front door key, told me "She's all yours, Sandy," went home, lay down and died.

Old Mrs. Callister said that Fred had been waiting for me to come home so he could be sure the paper was in safe hands before he passed on. Maybe so. Old Fred was a strong-willed man.

So I took over the paper. That was way back before we had any inkling of the war coming. I was just a fresh kid out of college, but I'd worked for Fred Callister as printer's devil, sweeper, ad salesman, delivery boy and switchboard operator. We never had but one phone, but old Fred called it our switchboard.

I was a high school sports reporter, copyeditor, proofreader and coffee gopher. I was in charge of pulling copies and locking 'em in the safe to be sent on to Washington to register copyrights. I was staff photographer, reviewer and critic. When Fred was too busy to write editorials, I ghosted them. Altogether I figured I knew a good deal about running a weekly.

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The rest of the staff was Mort Van Vlack, who served as both linotypist and pressman, and my own mother Gladys Hall, who was business manager of the *Times-Gazette.*

We never made a lot of money, but we met our payroll every week, and we never missed an edition come drought, flood, heat or snow. There was a gap when we shipped from Fremont, Ohio, to New Fremont, Ganymede, but that was the only time.

Now Herman Minkowsky was a very different kind of fellow from the boys I'd gone to school with back in Harding County. When we got to the university in the east and were assigned as roommates, we must have hit it off like the country mouse and the city mouse. We had different ideas and different styles, and sometimes we could hardly understand each other, but underneath it we were like cousins, if you know what I mean. We were both going to major in journalism. We both had printer's ink in our veins.

He was going to become a famous reporter for a big city daily. I was headed back to Harding County. But we were both dedicated to our careers, and as we got to understand each other, we developed a strong feeling of respect and even of mutual affection.

After college we went our separate ways. Mine was exactly what I'd planned — back to Ohio and my country weekly. Herman followed a different course. He was right at home in the city, but he couldn't settle down to any one job.

We didn't see each other again for years and years, but every Christmas we'd exchange a letter and bring each other up to date on our lives. My letters to Herman must have been pretty dull. Year after year I ran the Fremont *Times-Gazette*, chronicling the seasons and the crops, the births and weddings and deaths of Harding County.

Herman's letters were very different. At first he was out to become a famous journalist, and he landed as a copyboy for a big tabloid. After that he switched to a magazine job. Then he went to work for a million-dollar company putting out their house organ. He wrote me that they paid a fortune compared to legitimate journalism, but he hated it so much he quit cold inside of two weeks.

Then he went to work editing some pulp magazines, and that job he loved. He wrote me that the pay was terrible, the work was overwhelming, his office was a little corner of a drafty loft, but he loved every minute of it. He even put me on for a free subscription, and I started reading the wild stories he edited. Absolutely amazing, but

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they were such a contrast to my own small-town life that I kind of enjoyed them, and saved all the magazines up in the attic over the *Times-Gazette* office.

When Herman's publisher quit after a few years, Herman decided to become a literary agent. (The publisher switched over to manufacturing sexy playing cards and bought a sixty-room mansion in Florida after two years.)

Herman figured that he knew all the other editors, and he knew all the authors, and he should be able to pick up enough clients to make a fair living. He was right, too, although he never made it into the sixty-room mansion class.

That's the way things went along for all those years, me getting more and more settled into my regular ways running the *Times-Gazette* and even expanding to take in some job printing for Harding County schools and for the small businesses and social leadership of Fremont, while Herman did better and better in the literary agent business as his clients started breaking through into the bestseller and Hollywood-deal brackets.

Then all of a sudden Herman phoned me up.

My wife answered the switchboard — yes, I'd got married along the way and it was for love, too, not just to stay out of the final on-planet shootout — my wife answered the switchboard and came running over to where I was typing out an editorial on the meaning of sumer and tapped me on the shoulder and said, "It's long distance for you, person to person. Better come talk."

I picked up the phone and told the operator that, yes, I was Sanford Hall all right, and she said to go ahead, and this voice which I must confess I didn't recognize said, "Sandy, this is Herman Minkowsky, how are you?"

Now I hadn't spoken with Herman in so many years and I was so amazed to hear him asking me a question that all I could do was answer it, direct. "Pretty good," I said, "got a little arthritis in my shoulder but I'm pretty good. And how are *you?*"

"Fine, fine. Now listen, Sandy, are you still running that little paper?"

I said I was.

"And you have a job shop too?"

I said I did.

He said, "I think I've got a nice piece of job printing for you, if you can handle it."

"What is it?" I asked him.

"A magazine," he said. "I need a complete job — typesetting, some plates for illustrations, color separation for the cover. I need printing, folding and binding."

"How big?" I asked.

"Not very big. Standard pulp

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size, ninety-six pages, and a very short run."

I thought about that for a minute, scratched some figures on a sheet of yellow copy paper that lay on the desk next to my old L. C. Smith (the same one old man Callister had used when I was his copyboy), and told Minkowsky I could handle the job. I quoted him some prices, scaled to length of run.

Herman didn't make a sound for a few seconds. I thought he was running up a big phone bill, and I wondered if he'd been struck speechless by the price I'd quoted him. Still holding the phone to my ear, I started working over the figures to see if I could squeeze a few dollars out of the price.

Suddenly Herman's voice came back through the earpiece. "Sandy, did I hear you right? Let me have that price again."

I repeated the figures.

"You have any profit in there, anything for you?"

"A little."

"Well, you've got the job, chum. There's just one thing. There are certain, ah, delicate aspects of this venture. You've got to keep it under your hat, all right?"

I looked across the *Times-Gazette* office at my wife.

She was brewing a pot of tea on the office hot plate. It was a quiet afternoon in the *Times-Gazette* weekly cycle. The latest edition had come off the press, and Mort Van Vlack was out in our old Ford panel truck distributing the run to the paper boys and the few retail stores that carried the paper.

"Linetta," I called over to my wife, "Gladys is working on the books at home. Would you go over there and get me a summary of payables and receivables."

She gave me a look like she knew I wanted to be alone in the office for a while, which I did, but after all these years she and I respect each other enough to go along with that kind of thing.

As soon as she'd shut the door behind her, I said in the phone, "Now look here, Herman, you're not getting into the pornography field, are you? Because if you are, that's your own concern but I don't want any part of it, understand?"

Minkowsky laughed loudly and said, "No smut, Sandy."

"Or maybe a little piracy?"

"No, nothing shady. This is perfectly legal, it's just that we're going to have a unique distribution system, and we don't want any publicity leaks. And we absolutely don't want any unauthorized copies of the magazine getting out, that's the most important part."

That sounded all right, but there was a kind of odd feeling to it, if you know what I mean. I told Herman so. I said, "Herman, I don't know what you're into here,

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but before I do any work I need to know more about it. Not that I distrust you, mind, I just have to know what I'm doing, is all."

Herman didn't say anything again, and I just pictured him in my mind's eye, holding the telephone while the toll charges ran up. Of course I pictured him as he'd looked in our college days, not the better part of three decades later. But finally he said something more in a kind of solemn, reasonable, don't-push-me-past-my-limit tone of voice.

"All right, Sanford," he said. "I can understand your feeling that way — so I'll make you a proposition. You come on to the city, and we'll have a meeting, and you'll learn what this project is about."

Now *I* held my silence and let him go on.

"Somebody else will be here and we'll explain to you as much as we can reveal. If you're satisfied then and you want the job, it's yours. If you don't like the job, you can drop out right then. But you'll have to forget everything we've told you then. Have you ever signed a confidential disclosure agreement?"

I hadn't, but it was clear enough what it was about, and I didn't mind signing. Even though I was acting in the capacity of a printing contractor, I'd been through the business of protecting news sources often enough to be familiar with those sensitivities. Even in Harding County, Ohio, yes.

"But there's one more problem," I said to Herman.

He asked what that was.

"Trip to the city's an expensive proposition."

"Don't worry about that. You'll be on full expenses plus a consulting fee while we work this out. Will you come?"

Well that changed things aplenty! We set up an appointment for the next week, and I went back to my essay on the meaning of summer.

The next week we laid out the paper with a bunch of reserve news, press releases and book reviews by the local self-styled intelligentsia, put the issue to bed a day early, and Linetta and I headed for the city, leaving Gladys in charge of the office and Mort in charge of the plant. Such as they were.

We checked into a hotel pretty late, and in the morning Linetta headed for the department stores while I headed for Herman Minkowsky's office and the meeting with his mysterious partner. Herman's office was actually a suite in a converted apartment building; I looked at his receptionist and at the fancy equipment he gave her to work with, and decided that Herman was doing all

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right in the agent business.

Inside his private office I laid eyes on the great man, my college roommate, for the first time since June almost thirty years before. He'd put on a roll around the middle and grown a beard which he kept neatly trimmed, and he dressed in the antique tweedy good taste that must mark him as a *bona fide* literary figure.

For a minute I felt like a naive country boy with straw sticking right out of my Sears & Ward collar, but Herman was around his desk and pumping my hand in a second, telling me how fine I looked and then leading me over to meet his mysterious partner.

He'd been sitting unobtrusively in a wing chair facing Herman, and I hadn't even seen him till now.

"Sandy, I want you to meet the man behind this project. One of my top clients. I'm sure you've read his books."

The man he introduced rose from his chair. He was very tall, at least half a foot taller than my own six feet. And thin, thin as a rail, with sparse blond hair and pale-blue eyes and rimless octagonal glasses. I had the feeling that a stiff breeze would pick him up and carry him right out the window — if Herman ever turned off the air conditioning and opened a window, that is.

"Stinky," Herman said, "this is Sanford Hall, the Joseph Pulitzer of Harding County, Ohio. Editor, publisher and job printer par excellence. I think he's the man to be Nick Neptune."

Stinky didn't put out his hand. He just looked me up and down, nodded, and sat back into his wing chair. In a quiet, steady voice he said, "Very well, Herman, if he has your confidence."

"Is that your real name?" I asked. "Stinky?"

Herman Minkowsky said, "You'd know Stinky's real name if you heard it. He doesn't put his photo on any of his books because he doesn't want people bothering him in the street. And he doesn't shake hands because he doesn't want to get germs."

"Well then —" I started, but Herman stopped me.

"Stinky," Herman said, "Sanford has agreed to confidentiality in this matter, whether he takes the job or not. Shall we proceed?"

Stinky nodded.

"Sanford," Herman resumed, "as I told you on the phone, we plan to issue a new magazine. It will be published in the old pulp format and called *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine.* We'll probably only publish one issue, although that is not to be revealed to the public."

"And you want me to produce it?"

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"Right!"

"Well, I don't see what all the mystery is about, Herman. I can do the job for you okay. Might run a little short of fonts, but the *Times-Gazette* is about due to order a couple anyhow. We'll just get 'em for this job and then turn 'em over to the paper afterward.

"But," I said, leaning over and jabbing my forefinger at Herman, "why all the cloak-and-dagger stuff?"

By now he was sitting back in a great big chair behind his behemoth of a desk. He stood up and walked around the desk so that he was standing over Stinky and myself. "In strictest confidence, Sandy, we're going to create a collector's item."

I dug my heels into his thick carpet and pushed myself back into my chair laughing. "Is that all?" I bellowed. "All of this fuss and money to make a rare magazine? Herman, you're out of your head!"

At that he exchanged a glance with Stinky. Herman looked a little upset, but Stinky didn't feel a thing, or if he did he didn't let it show in his face. He made a funny little gesture with one hand, and Herman walked behind his desk and sat down.

"Never mind what you think of the state of my head, Sandy," said Herman. "We just plan to publish a limited-edition pulp magazine and control the circulation very, very carefully. Stinky is in charge of the business side, by which I mean mainly that he'll pay the bills."

I looked at the mysterious pale Stinky in a new light, but he kept his poker face. A piece of ice, I thought, wondering who he really was.

Herman went on. "I'll provide the material to go in the book, and you'll handle the physical end of production. We'll also need a front corporation, and neither Stinky nor I can have our names associated with the magazine. The editor will be Nick Neptune. Officially. Of course there isn't any such person, but if somebody has to stand up and act as Nick, it'll have to be you.

"What you get out of it is maybe a little fun plus — when I went over your bid with Stinky last night, we determined that we'll accept your figures, plus paying a nice bonus if you do a good job and keep quiet about it.

"Now, we've had enough discussion. The project is *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine.* Do you want the job?"

I said — well, you can surely guess what I said. I liked the idea of producing the magazine from the start. It sounded like fun, and it would be profitable. As for my concern over ethics — well, I'm no Pharisee, mind you, but I'm no crook either, nor a panderer. I was

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serious about not wanting to get involved with pornography, and I didn't want to infringe any copyrights or work for a spy ring, and I might as well say that I've never printed hate literature and I expect I never will.

But *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine* sounded legal, moral and not too fattening, and it was a nice piece of job work for the shop. So we spent the rest of the day working out details, and the next day Linetta and I were back in Fremont at the *Times-Gazette* conducting our business and waiting for word from the city as to when we could start work on the magazine.

It came pretty soon. Even though I was supposed to be Neptune, Minkowsky actually gathered all the material for the magazine, and with connections he'd built up over the last twenty years he did an amazing job.

I don't know what kind of rates he paid, using Stinky's money of course, but he told me that he was able to get limited rights to some stories that authors were writing for other publishers. By the time copy arrived in Fremont, Herman'd put together a complete magazine without there being any outside publicity by appealing to people who were his clients or from whom he'd bought stories back in his editing days.

He got a story from old Robert Silverberg that Silverberg said he'd originally written for the Palmer *Other Worlds* when Silverberg was just a beginner, and that had never appeared in that magazine for some reason. He got a really funny story from Isaac Asimov, a sequel to a famous old yarn called "Christmas on Ganymede." Some irony there!

He actually got a new Curtis Newton story from Edmond Hamilton and a John Star short from Jack Williamson.

And then he scored his real coup — although to me it seemed a little bit morbid. He contacted the estates of four deceased authors and managed to wangle unpublished pieces by Doc Smith, John W. Campbell, Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs. They were all minor works, but the name values were terrific.

My own experience with pulp magazines was limited to reading the ones that Herman had sent me when he was editing them, but even with that limited knowledge it seemed to me that he had put together a sure winner.

He even pulled some strings and got a bunch of unpublished art by great old pulp illustrators. His cover for *Nick Neptune's* was a marvelously atmospheric scene by the late Hannes Bok — a musty, mysterious Egyptian tomb, with ankhs and mummy cases and

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various sorts of funerary sculpture standing around. Just to look at it makes you feel as if something uncanny is about to happen.

There were a couple of drawings by Frank R. Paul and some by Virgil Finlay.

Of course the artwork and the stories didn't exactly go together in all cases, but I took a plane east for a conference with Herman — he wouldn't come anywhere near Fremont — and we managed to sort out the stories and the illustrations until they matched at least in general theme.

Minkowsky asked me to write an editorial for the first issue. He was afraid that his own or Stinky's style might be a giveaway. I wrote it. It wasn't too hard, rather like a Fremont *Times-Gazette* essay on the virtues of the American farmer.

Mort Van Vlack began setting the stories in odd moments and after hours. He was happy to get the overtime.

And *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine* was under way!

The only snag we hit was with the cover. The *Times-Gazette* isn't set up for color work, so we had to send out the separations on that Bok cover, with lurid chartreuse lettering overlaying it, and then farm out the printing too. But Herman's notion of getting confidential disclosure agreements sealed up any leaks at that end. The color people thought *Neptune's* was a test run for a big publisher, and they were eager to get the full-scale run when it came along, so they were happy to co-operate on this job.

So there we were, the covers all ready to use, the body material coming off the press, even a space cleared in the old wooden storage shed behind the *Times-Gazette* office to store the run of magazines until they were trucked to the distributor. The only thing that struck me as odd was the fact that Minkowsky hadn't given me any hint as to who the distributor would be.

I had Gladys put through a call to Herman's office the day before the magazine would actually be ready. That was what he'd asked. When I told him tomorrow was the day, he said he had some arrangements to make, but that he'd be out to Fremont the next afternoon to see the book and to give me some more instructions, and my check.

Next day I was over at Evelyn's Oasis, across the square from the *Times-Gazette*, having some lunch to work off a due bill for Evelyn's regular ad in the paper. The phone rang, and in a minute Evelyn said I'd better take the call. It was Linetta — she was spelling Gladys at the switchboard — and Linetta said there was a man to see me, very

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important, wouldn't talk on the phone.

I told her to give him a cup of tea, and I'd be back as soon as I finished my hot pot roast sandwich.

Little while later and I went back over to the *Times-Gazette.* I saw a rental car parked inconspicuously in the alley beside the building, and when I got inside a man stood up and said, "You took your time getting back, Sanford. Didn't I tell you I was coming?"

I gaped. The stranger had a bunch of red hair standing up all over his head, big tortoise-shell eyeglasses without any lenses at all, and a funny fake mustache attached to the phony nose.

"Herman?" I said.

He frowned — I think he frowned, as much as I could see his face through the artificial shrubbery and the stick-on nose. "Shhh!" he hissed, grabbing me by the elbow and putting his mouth close to my ear. "Nobody is supposed to know. That's why I'm in disguise."

There I was, laughing at poor Herman again. He always had a flair for the theatrical, but it never rose above melodrama. Maybe that's why he did so well as an editor and agent. I said, "Okay, I won't give you away. You want to see the magazines?"

He said, "Where are they?"

I led him out the back door of the *Times-Gazette* building and over to the shed. I opened the door and said, "There it is, Herman, the first issue of *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine.*"

He picked up a copy and flipped through its pages. "What do you think of it, Sanford? Considering that you're Nick Neptune."

"Well," I told him, "for somebody who doesn't really know that much about pulp magazines, I think it's pretty good. The only thing is, it has a kind of old-fashioned look to it, and the stories creak a bit in places."

"That's just fine. That's exactly what Stinky and I want."

I wanted to ask him who Stinky really was. I had a number of guesses — B. Traven, James Tiptree, Jr., J. D. Salinger, Howard Hughes.

But before I could ask, Herman said, "Look here, I want to ask you to do something. Where were you a few minutes ago, when your wife called you?"

"Over to Evelyn's eating my lunch."

"Well, look, I want you to go back to Evelyn's. Get yourself some dessert. Better yet, have a drink, have a drink on me. Does Evelyn have a liquor license?"

Herman seemed to be getting agitated. I didn't know why he wanted to be alone with his

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magazines — I thought of them as his — but I said yes, Evelyn sold liquor too.

"Fine, you go on back and have a drink for yourself, and I'll be right over."

Well, I don't consider myself a heavy-drinking man, but if it was important to Herman, I wouldn't mind sipping a shot of Jack Daniels Black Label as long as he was paying for it. JD was a taste that Herman and I shared. I might even have a double.

I walked back through the office, told Linetta where I was headed and went ahead. I sat in the Oasis and looked across the square, nursing my drink. Next to the newspaper office I saw Herman opening the trunk of his rented car. He took some stuff out, disappeared back toward the shed, reappeared in a couple of minutes, put some stuff back into the trunk and walked over to the Oasis.

He sat down at my table and told Evelyn to bring the bottle back and leave it, along with a glass for him. That was about the oddest I'd even seen Herman act. He kept looking across the street toward my place like he was waiting for something to happen, and all the time he was drinking fine bourbon and chattering away nervously.

"Tomorrow's a vital day," he said. "Tomorrow, Sanford, you have to be Nick Neptune."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"I mean there's a man coming to see you tomorrow."

I must have looked a little dubious about that. "Don't worry," Herman said, "you don't have to do anything dishonest, and you'll be well paid. Stinky has a fat bank account."

"Well," I said, "then what's going on?"

Herman finally took his eyes off the window of Evelyn's Oasis and looked me in the face, through those funny lenseless glasses of his, his red wig sticking up and his fake mustache dripping JD. "Did you ever hear of Louie Langdon?" he asked.

I thought for a moment. "Sounds vaguely familiar. Pulp author?"

"Not quite. But close. He's a collector, primarily, although he used to pop up with an occasional minor story in the old days. He's been involved with adventure fiction for forty-odd years, since he was a kid. He's one of those characters with no particular talent but a lot of energy and ambition.

"So all these years he's made a living working in a computer factory upstate while he built up what he claims is the best pulp and adventure collection in the world. What the Vatican library is to porn, Langdon's collection is to pulp. I've seen his collection, and he's got all

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the scarcest items. He *is* a fine collector."

"Sounds admirable," I said.

"He's also one of the nastiest bastards around," Herman said. "He's vicious, he's vindictive, and he'll do anything to crush any other collector who has any chance to get something that he's lacking. There are stories about him that — when E. E. Ungano was on his deathbed, on his deathbed mind you, Langdon came to Ungano's house and told his wife that —"

Herman Minkowsky didn't get to finish the story of Langdon and Ungano's wife because I saw a huge cloud of smoke billowing up over the *Times-Gazette* office. I jumped up and knocked over the table and the Jack Daniels, and I was out the front door like a shot, Minkowsky about one half a stride behind me.

I burst through the front door of the newspaper office and found — my wife sitting at the switchboard with a cup of tea in one hand and a pencil in the other, taking a classified ad over the telephone. Herman Minkowsky banged into me from the rear, and I started moving again, through the little half-high swinging door in the counter, past my own desk and into the back of the building, the plant, looking for flames *there*.

And all I found was Mort Van Vlack working over the *Neptune* plates with a sledge hammer. Herman and Stinky wanted a controlled edition, they were going to get one.

I screeched to a halt, Mort said, "Howdy do," and this time without Herman having to collide with me, I took off still again, out the back door and down the steps to the old lot where the wooden shed stood. There it was, roaring in flames, black smoke rising straight into the cloudless afternoon.

"Oh my God," I wailed, "all the Neptune books!" I spun on my heel to get back to the switchboard and phone over to Buffalo Falls for the volunteer fire brigade, but before I could get my call through, the volunteers roared up in their old American-LaFrance engine. Turned out that Evelyn had phoned 'em from the Oasis as soon as she saw why Herman and I had run out.

The volunteers kept the fire from spreading to the *Times-Gazette* or anything else, but the shed itself was a total loss. Small loss, it was so old and rickety. But the magazines! The magazines!

I turned to Herman Minkowsky and I said, "By God, but I'm sorry, Herman. I should never have stored the books out here. I can't figure out how that fire started, but whatever caused it, they're completely ruined. Any copies that weren't burned up, why, look —" and I poked at a pile of charred and

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water-logged and foam-soaked garbage "— any that aren't burned up are wrecked anyhow.

"Herman, what are we going to do? What's Stinky going to say?"

Now the strange thing was, Herman didn't act upset at all. Excited, yes, but not upset. He got the strangest light in his eyes, and he started poking around those charred remains, and he pulled something out of the mess and held it up in front of him. "Sanford," he said, "don't worry about anything. This is just perfect."

I said I didn't understand how he could think that. Would Stinky pay to do the whole production job over? What was going to happen?

Herman said that everything was delightful, that I'd get my full payment for the production work, plus the bonus he'd talked about, plus Stinky would pay for the loss of the shed. I was not to file an insurance claim. Herman stuck the hunk of garbage he'd salvaged under his arm and said, "Just one thing, Sanford, I want you to promise on your honor to personally dispose of this mess," and he gestured to the burned-up magazines. "Today!"

I said I would, and he shook my hand and started to leave. I walked him to his rented car — the volunteers had gone on back to Buffalo Falls by now — and just as he started to climb behind the wheel, I said, "Hold on, Herman. What should I tell Langdon?"

"What?"

"I said, what should I tell Langdon? Is he still coming tomorrow? You said before that I had to play Nick Neptune for that weird magazine collector."

Herman got the biggest, oddest grin on his face then, and he said, "I forgot all about that, Sandy," only it sounded to me more like he'd thought I would never ask.

"Here," he said, and handed me the battered remains of a magazine that he'd pulled out of the burnt-up shed. "When Louie arrives, you tell him that you were Nick Neptune. You tell him the whole story of the magazine, only keep me out of it and, for heaven's sake, keep Stinky out of it.

"If I know Louie Langdon's collector's heart, he'll ask you if any copies of Neptune survived the fire, or if there are any proofs or unbound signatures or covers or anything — *anything* — he can get as a memento of the magazine. He doesn't really want a memento. He'll be after something to put him one-up on the other collectors.

"He'll try and charm something out of you, he'll try and wheedle something out of you, and if you resist long enough, he'll try and buy something from you. How you handle Louie is up to you, Sanford, but when you get tired of playing

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with him, I want you to give him this.

"Give it to him, or sell it to him, or let him swipe it from under you. But you make sure that he has it when he leaves Fremont!" And he tapped that burned, battered, soaked carcass of a fragmentary magazine with his finger tip, and he clamped on his safety belt and turned on his car engine and drove away.

The next morning was business as usual. Taking care of *Times-Gazette* business, that is. Mort was very upset about the fire and the whole Neptune episode, but I told him what Herman had said, that we'd still be paid, and that we all — Mort, Gladys, Linetta and I — were to keep quiet about it, especially if and when Louie Langdon showed up.

He did.

I was eating lunch at Evelyn's Oasis again, telling Evelyn how lucky I felt that the fire was only in an old wooden shed with nothing valuable in it, when the phone in the restaurant rang, and this time it was Gladys saying that a Mr. Langdon was here to see me. Could I come right back? I could tell from Gladys' voice that she didn't like Mr. Langdon, but I told her to offer him a cup of tea and I'd be back as soon as I finished my meal.

I had an extra cup of Evelyn's fresh coffee and strolled back to the *Times-Gazette*. There, sitting at my desk and examining my notes (which could hardly have interested him, being the rough draft of a Halloween editorial), sat just about the unpleasantest man I had ever laid eyes on.

Now I knew why Herman and Stinky disliked this fellow.

He seemed to combine a kind of surly defensive manner with flashes of hearty fail-fellowship that didn't ring true at all, overlaid with a terrific desire to impress folks with his own importance. I think he counted a little too much on me as a country bumpkin, too, which didn't set very nicely.

To top it all off, he showed me something that he said was proof of his devotion to adventure literature and particularly to the late Edgar Rice Burroughs. He reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a long, thin-bladed knife and waved it under my nose. That I did not appreciate in the least.

I must have jumped back five feet when he brandished that thing at me, and he just laughed and said it was a genuine Barsoomian stiletto, custom-ground according to the specifications in the John Carter stories, and that he carried it with him wherever he went.

I tried to ignore the sticker, and I didn't care for Langdon at all, but I'd given Herman my promise. So I asked what Langdon was after.

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"I've come to talk with Nicholas Neptune," he said.

I said I was Neptune.

Langdon's face got a crafty look on it, and he said, "Is that your real name?"

I said no, I was actually Sanford Hall, but that Nick Neptune seemed a more atmospheric name for the kind of magazine I was running. And what could I do for him?

"I am universally recognized," Langdon rumbled, "as the world's leading authority on the history of adventure literature. I have written six standard books on the subject, and I am working on an authoritative revision of *The Later Pulp Period, 1953 to Date,* for Latham and Latham. I need full information on the background of your magazine and how you got the material for it."

He stood up and pulled a notebook out of his pocket, leaned on the big iron *Times-Gazette* safe and got ready to write.

So I told him about the fire and told him that we were uninsured and that the backers of the magazine had refused any more capital. "So you see, Mr. Langdon, I'm afraid you traveled all the way out here to Ohio for nothing. There is no Neptune magazine and there never will be, and I'm just a small-town newspaperman."

At that point Langdon acted exactly the way Herman Minkowsky had predicted. He asked if any copies of the magazine had survived the fire, and I told him no, and he said was I sure? and I said yes, and he said were any galleys left? and I said no, and he said were the covers all destroyed too? and I said yes.

He asked if he could see the site of the fire, and I showed him the charred place where the shed had stood. I'd cleared away even the remnants of the fire, and there was nothing to see but some blackened earth and some burnt weeds.

He shook his head sadly, and we started back into the newspaper building when something caught the corner of his eye. At the same instant he called, "What's that?" and dived for the top step at the back of the plant where I'd carefully tossed the wrecked copy of the magazine Herman had salvaged yesterday.

Langdon came up clutching the horrible mess to his bosom like it was a piece of the True Cross, and said defiantly, "No copies left, hey? What do you call *this?*" And he brandished the magazine at me with a kind of clenched-teeth smirk of triumph that set my teeth on edge.

"Oh, that," I said casually, "do you want that disgusting thing? Look at it!"

He held it reverently, but as if

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he'd never let go, and carefully carried the thing inside the building and to my desk. He put it down, but he never relinquished contact with it, as if he'd established a claim and would never be pried loose from the hulk.

"Look at it," I repeated. "The cover's completely gone. It was an original Bok."

Langdon groaned.

"The front pages are gone."

Langdon groaned again, louder.

"It's soaked with water and chemicals."

Langdon looked grief-stricken.

"Half the type on every page is charred."

Langdon pounded his fist on my desk alongside the grimy mess. "Nonetheless," he said, wagging a long and grimy-nailed finger under my nose, "it is still a copy of *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine.* It is a first-edition Burroughs," which information he must have got from Minkowsky because he hadn't got it from me. "And a first-edition Campbell. And a first-edition Doc Smith."

"S'pose so," I said.

"And this copy," he gloated, holding that ugly, smelly, charred, damp remnant of a magazine in the air like it was the Holy Grail, "is unique. *Unique!*" He cackled like the mad scientist in a bad old horror movie. "Oh," he said, his voice low and full of ugly triumph, "wait until Amundsen hears about this! Wait until Wollheim and Teitler and Coriell and Caz hear about it! Wait until Heins begs me for a photostat!"

He looked at me, and I swear I'd never in my life looked into the eyes of a genuine madman until that moment. "I need this item," he said. "I won't give it up! What will you take for it?"

"Take for it?" I said. "I don't want anything for it. Take it, take it."

He shook my hand, and it was like shaking hands with a character out of Dickens. Scrooge or Beadle, or better yet Uriah Heep. And then he dropped my hand and ran out of the building, literally ran, and jumped in a battered car and drove away, and that was the last time I ever saw Louie Langdon, or even heard from him, until the day of his death.

But those collectors have some kind of grapevine all their own. I don't know how the word spread — maybe it was Herman Minkowsky or his friend Stinky who leaked the news on purpose — but by nightfall I'd had two phone calls from fellows who said they published special newsletters and wanted to talk to Mr. Neptune. I told them both that I was Neptune, we'd been burned out, and there wasn't going to be any magazine.

Next morning at seven o'clock I

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had a person-to-person call from a fellow in Hilo, Hawaii. He introduced himself as the director of the International Magazine Registry and demanded six copies of *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine*. Said the registry required them for their archives. I told him there was no such magazine. Fellow said that Louie Langdon had a copy — imagine that, less than twenty-four hours and he knew all about Louie.

Well, I took his number and said I'd get in touch.

Within a week I had close to thirty telephone calls and a hundred letters from collectors trying to beg, buy, or bamboozle their way to copies of *Neptune*. I phoned Herman about it, and he sounded happy as a bear in a bee-tree with nobody at home and said I should forward everything to him. He really sounded pleased when I told him about the magazine registry call.

"That's Amundsen," Minkowsky said. "I knew he'd be in touch. This is delicious, absolutely delicious! Good work, Sandy."

Well, I had his check by then, and so I was pretty happy too. I have to admit that I still didn't understand, really understand, what the whole sequence of events meant. I mean, each thing that we'd done, I grasped — gathering the material, producing the one edition of *Neptune*, the fact that the run had been destroyed, Stinky's refusal to put up money for a reprinting, Herman's giving me the battered copy to give to Langdon....

But it didn't make any sense.

One more thing that made the back of my brain itch when I thought about it. I couldn't prove this and so I never confronted him with it, but I was certain that Minkowsky set the storage shed fire himself. All of the mysterious going back and forth between his rented car and the back of the newspaper plant, the way he acted so expectant in Evelyn's Oasis, and the very peculiar way he responded to the damage, paying for the shed — even with Stinky's money — and not wanting to claim insurance....

It was all a mystery, but I was more involved in keeping my weekly going and in running the job shop. We were heavily into the consolidated high school's yearbook by then, and except for the Neptune project that yearbook was the biggest and most lucrative job in Harding County. We couldn't afford to botch it — or to get the books delivered too late for senior week at the school. Those kids take their yearbook seriously, and I don't blame them.

I kept getting an occasional letter or telephone call about *Neptune's Magazine*. They were all forwarded to Herman Minkowsky,

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and what he did with them was none of my concern. June came, and we made the yearbook deadline and collected our money for that, and Gladys and Linetta and Mort Van Vlack and I settled back for a relatively easy season of doing just the *Times-Gazette* and the usual run of wedding invitations and at-home cards.

And that, of course, was the summer the war came. I still can't get over the foresight and efficiency of the government, getting the Jovian moons into shape so fast and getting so much of civilization up here. It must have been the Benford Fusion Pellet that did it — just about unlimited power from the most commonplace of materials. Without that, I expected we'd have had a casualty rate close to 100 percent instead of a survival rate of over 90 percent.

That, just for starters.

In addition to saving most of the population of Earth, the terrific new power source made terra-forming work, and it even permitted us to lug most of the paraphernalia of civilization right along with us. That's how you got up here with your rare book stock, Mr. Bartleby-Ames, instead of just your skin and your skivvies, and lucky to make it at all.

And it's how I got here, and Linetta and Gladys and Mort Van Vlack and the Fremont *Times-Gazette*, right down to the linotype, the press, and the old iron office safe. I can even look out that window and see Evelyn's Oasis across the square here in New Fremont and almost believe I'm back in Harding County except for the odd tints that the Jupiter-shine puts to everything.

We got settled into New Fremont, Ganymede, and every so often I'd find myself marveling that here I was a couple of hundred million miles from home. Earth was a blown-out hulk barely visible in the sky, and yet I was still running stories on the high school play. Absolutely amazing.

Then Herman Minkowsky telephoned again. He'd been relocated over on Callisto along with his whole literary agency. So the call had to be radio-boosted, and it was a little crackly, but I could tell that it was still the same old Herman on the line.

His voice sounded full of glee, and somehow I felt a little quiver when I heard it, wondering what new bit of business was coming up. He told me right off. "Sandy, I hope you're not too busy right now with your giant journal."

Nope, I told him, it was actually a pretty quiet period.

He said, "Wonderful, great. Now listen, this is very important. You're going to be Nicholas Neptune again."

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"You mean Stinky wants the magazine revived? Out *here?*"

"Nothing of the sort." Over the long-distance booster I could hear him draw away from the telephone and puff on a pipe. He was using up the last of his precious Earth tobacco.

"This is just for one day," he resumed. "There's a big conference coming up here on Callisto, of people who collect pulp magazines. The government wants to maintain the continuity of Earth culture, and they're encouraging things like this.

"We need Nick Neptune there. We'll bring you in by pellet-shuttle, put you up at the conference hotel, and all you need to do is take about fifteen minutes to sit up at a dais. Then we'll shuttle you home again, and you get all expenses plus another bonus from Stinky."

I thought about it for a minute. We had a folder of the high school senior essays in the reserve drawer, ferried up from the old Harding County *Times-Gazette* building. Gladys could run the *TimesGazette* if she had to, and so I said, "Can I bring Linetta with me?"

Herman said, "Absolutely. I'll send you your tickets."

That's the way Herman operated. Direct, even arbitrary. But effective.

A week later the tickets arrived. I told Gladys and Mort what had to be done, and Linetta and I were off to the conference. They were holding it in the Muelbach Hotel in New Kansas City, Callisto, and the minute we walked in the big revolving doors we were surrounded by the strangest bunch of maniacs I have ever laid eyes on, back on Earth or up here on the Jovian moons.

There was a message waiting, and I got Linetta settled and went on up to the penthouse suite where I found Herman Minkowsky lounging with a bottle of genuine Earth Jack Daniels in front of him. I was happy to see that he'd left his disguise at home. He said, "Have a seat, Nick."

I did a double take at being called Nick, laughed a trifle unsteadily and sat down. I looked around the luxurious suite and saw a tall, pale man sitting on a chair looking so faint that he almost disappeared into the pastel appointments of the room.

"Hello again, Stinky," I said.

He nodded. Just barely.

"Now this conference," Herman launched into his talk, "is held annually. Different city each year. It was slated for Kansas City, Kansas this year, and the cultural-continuity policy dictated that it be held here instead. In New Kansas City, Callisto.

"These magazine collectors travel thousands of miles to meet old friends and rivals, to brag about

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recent acquisitions, to look at exhibits and to get a chance at some rare old copy of *Miracle Tales* or *Golden Fleece* or *New Story* or *Zeppelin Stories.*"

"Zeppelin Stories?"

"Oh, yes, or *Civil War Stories,* or *South Sea Stories.* There were a lot of very specialized pulps. *Spicy Horror Tales. Ranch Romances.* Single-hero books — the Shadow, Captain Hazzard, the Phantom Detective. Hundreds of the things."

"Okay," I said. "I don't believe it but I believe it, if you take my meaning. And the government wants them to go on collecting and swapping those things, even out here."

"Right. Cultural continuity. That's what it means."

"But I don't see what you need *me* for," I said.

"All right." Herman was suddenly all business. He leaned toward me, all of the mass of him looking like he was going to launch himself physically into what he was saying. "There's going to be an auction tomorrow afternoon after the big luncheon. There are going to be some pretty choice items offered. We need you to appear for a few minutes and introduce this item."

He turned slowly in his chair, picked up a fancy alligator-skin attache case and unzipped it. He pulled out a pulp magazine sealed in a transparent polythene bag and held it up for me to see. The cover showed a brooding, mysterious scene in the depths of a musty Egyptian tomb. Splattered across the top of the picture in lurid chartreuse lettering was the title of the book.

"Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine!" I gasped.

"Right!"

It wasn't the hearty promoter's voice of Herman Minkowsky that carried that one word, but the chilling hiss of Stinky from his chair.

I said, "But there were no copies left after the fire, except for—"

"Except for the battered copy that you gave to Louie Langdon, that he's been flaunting and gloating over ever since."

"Well," I said.

"Well, there's this one also," Herman said. "And unlike Louie's battered fragment, this one is complete, perfect, mint. And you're going to offer it for auction tomorrow."

I nodded agreement. All right, so that was Minkowsky's secret. All the while I was sitting in Evelyn's Oasis that day back in Fremont, Ohio, while Herman was making his way between the shed and his rented car, I suspected that he was starting the fire that destroyed the run of *Neptunes.*

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But now I realized that he'd done one other thing. He'd removed a mint copy of the book before he set the fire. Well, fine, he didn't tell me everything, and I didn't tell him everything, so we were even.

The icy voice of Stinky came slithering to me.

"Twelve hundred of the most fanatical collectors on the four moons are gathered in this hotel. Most of them are private hobbyists. A few represent libraries and other institutions. *Neptune's Magazine* is going to be the sensation of the sale. It is a prize above all prizes for these people. Not only will it draw general pulp collectors but Burroughs specialists, Howard specialists...."

He let his already low-pitched voice slide away into inaudibility for a moment. Then it rose again. "Mark my words, Hall. Once you introduce this magazine, the bidding will swiftly narrow to two men.

"One of them will be Louie Langdon." He spoke the name as if it were filth in his mouth. "The other will be Foster Fred Amundsen."

Minkowsky took over. "Amundsen *is* the International Magazine Registry. Or rather, the registry is Amundsen's private collection. He uses the institution as a front to con publishers and libraries into donating materials to him.

"He used to operate out of Hilo, Hawaii. Now he's set up his registry on Io." Herman made a quick gesture over his shoulder, into the crowded sky over New Kansas City, Callisto. "Amundsen's been collecting for over forty years. His collection and Langdon's are the two best in existence."

I said, "All right. I'm not really that interested."

But Herman went on undeterred. "In manner, Amundsen is the complete opposite of Langdon. Cheerful, witty, sympathetic, generous. But there's a streak submerged in Foster Fred Amundsen."

I was amazed to see Herman Minkowsky shudder. I turned toward Stinky's chair. He sat, paler than ever, clutching the arms of his chair until his knuckles were dead white.

"Under the skin," Herman resumed, "Amundsen and Louie Langdon are brothers. Rivals."

"And they hate each other's guts," Stinky hissed.

There was a moment of stillness in the room; then I shook myself into action. I reached across the table to take Herman's bottle of Earth-distilled Jack Daniels and a glass. "I don't see that all of this is my concern," I said. "I'll auction off the magazine if those are my

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instructions, take my pay and go back to Ganymede. Maybe even do a little piece on this conference for the *Times-Gazette,* and then if the truth be known, I'll feel well shed of the entire affair."

"Fine," said Herman, "just so you understand. And don't let Amundsen pull any fast ones on you about the magazine registry. He's made a lifetime pretense of creating a public archive, but the fact is that he's a glory-seeking, greedy, self-aggrandizing pack rat."

Stinky gave a loud hiss. I looked into his face, and for the first time saw real emotion there. Hatred. I wondered if he might not be a relative of the late, lamented Mr. E. E. Ungano.

I stood up and left the penthouse.

Downstairs I found Linetta and we spent the afternoon circulating among the magazine collectors. I was leery of revealing myself as Nicholas Neptune, and so I was just Sanford Hall, small-time newsman covering the conference, and I had a pretty good time. Most of the collectors were eager to talk abut their hobby, and since I was inclined to listen rather than to compete with them, we got along fine.

We got through the evening the same way, invited to a party in the suite of some folks from Nuevo Caracas, Europa, who were bidding to host the conference four years hence. Slept late the next morning, attended the big luncheon with a slight hangover, and prepared for the auction.

I sat in the audience with Linetta and watched fascinated as single copies and runs of half-century-old magazines were sold for unbelievable amounts. The money that people will pay for a copy of *Triple-X, Science Wonder Stories* or *Bill Barnes' War Birds* utterly flabbergasted me. They had survived the holocaust on Earth only by the grace of the Benford Fusion Pellet, and there would never be more than these few copies. That, of course, made them all the more precious.

Finally the auctioneer, a huge fat man with a greasy, ingratiating manner, made the announcement I was waiting for. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "as all of us who follow the current magazine scene are aware, a very bizarre and unfortunate incident took place shortly before Earth was, ah, vacated."

At this, there was a faint ripple of boos in the audience, either for the aliens who destroyed the Earth or for the fire that destroyed the magazines.

"We all know the regrettable story of the new pulp magazine that was almost published and of the

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fine line-up of authors it was to have presented." There was an undertone of names from the audience: Burroughs...Silverberg... Williamson.

"Until today," the auctioneer continued, "it was believed that only one copy of that magazine had escaped the conflagration. That copy — coverless, charred and torn — is the proud possession of Mr. Louie Langdon, who is to make a speech about it later today.

"But first we have the good fortune to have with us the editor and publisher of that magazine, Mr. Nicholas Neptune himself!"

I rose to a solid round of applause and strode to the platform. The auctioneer handed me an alligator attache case that I recognized as Herman Minkowsky's. I took it from him and said to the audience. "I'm sorry that we never quite got off the ground, folks, but here's something that you might like to have."

I looked around the room. Sitting near the end of one row of folding chairs, I recognized Louie Langdon. I smiled at him, and he looked back at me like he'd just bitten into a fresh lemon. Far at the opposite end of the room, surrounded by a bunch of subadolescent admirers, was a cheery-looking man wearing a huge badge. Even from where I stood I could read the bright enamel monogram: IMR. Ahah! The International Magazine Registry. This must be Foster Fred Amundsen in the flesh.

People were beginning to rustle around. So I unzipped the case, reached inside and pulled out the polythene-wrapped copy of *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine.* I held it up and turned slowly so that everyone could see the lurid cover. All the collectors were on their feet, and so I just waited until everybody'd had a good look and settled into their chairs again.

Before the auctioneer could even call for bids, jolly Foster Fred Amundsen was on his feet. "The International Magazine Registry bids one hundred dollars," he said. And sat down.

Langdon was on his feet looking outraged. "One hundred twenty-five dollars!" he shouted.

Right there the die was cast, and I could see what Herman and Stinky had set this whole thing up for. While the fat auctioneer ran the bidding, I let my eyes rove over the audience. There were Stinky and Herman sitting quietly in the last row, taking in every word with obvious pleasure.

A fellow with a big Tarzan lapel button topped Langdon's bid, then a little old lady with a kind of hairy, brutal picture stitched onto her coat topped that.

There must have been close to a

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dozen bidders, but just as Stinky'd predicted, they dropped out one by one until only Amundsen and Langdon remained.

When the bidding passed five hundred dollars, Langdon asked the auctioneer if personal checks were acceptable. The fat man said, "For you, Mr. Langdon, of course." Louie went up fifty dollars.

Foster Fred Amundsen was perspiring freely, the jovial look on his face replaced by a deadly determined one. I saw him and Langdon exchange glances that would have fried a Jovian ammonia-octopus. Amundsen said to the auctioneer, "Do you take credit cards?"

There was a brief exchange between the fat man and the cashier who cleaned up after sales were made. They buzzed, nodded, looked up, then the auctioneer said, "Sure, Foster, if you'll wait while we boosterphone to Io for your credit limit."

Amundsen raised the price over Langdon.

I watched the two collectors, and in the back of the room Herman and Stinky, trying to understand just what was going on. This was more than an auction for collectors, a lot more.

Just what the two rivals had ever done to Stinky I expected I would never know — not unless I could learn his true identity. But what Stinky and Herman were doing to the two collectors I could see very clearly, and it was something with a veneer of humor on it, covering something very serious and very ugly.

I could see it in Langdon's and Amundsen's faces, hear it in their voices as they quietly, bitterly raised their bids. They had both edged to the front of the room, and there they stood hardly an arm's length from each other, gazing greedily at the *Neptune* that I still held.

Langdon had his checkbook in his hand. He looked at it carefully, slipped it back in his jacket and said, "Eight seventy-five."

He already owned a *Neptune.* Before today he had thought it a unique item, the modern diadem of his entire collection. And that supremacy was being challenged by his arch rival.

Amundsen was trembling visibly, making some sort of magical passes with his fingers. He was staring as if hypnotized at the magazine. He whispered, "Nine hundred."

This was his chance, not merely to break Langdon's monopoly on *Neptune's Magazine* but actually to obtain a better copy than the one his enemy owned.

Langdon went up another notch.

Amundsen followed.

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Langdon leaned over and whispered something to Amundsen, then raised the bid to nine seventy-five.

Amundsen was drenched in sweat. He turned from the magazine, ninety degrees, to look squarely at Langdon. In a voice I could barely hear he said, "One thousand."

The room was as silent as death for five seconds, then cheers and applause broke out. When quiet was restored the auctioneer announced, "Mr. Amundsen has bid one thousand dollars. Are there any more bids?"

Silence.

"Going once."

Langdon seemed to shake visibly where he stood. He took out his checkbook and looked into it. He leaned over and grasped the edge of the auction table. "One thousand one hundred dollars," he said.

No one spoke. Amundsen stood where he was, his armpits and crotch dark with perspiration, his face running with it. Langdon's face was drained of blood. He chewed at his lower lip. A wave seemed to pass over him, and his ears and neck turned beet red. He began to reach for the magazine.

The auctioneer said, "Mr. Langdon bids one thousand one hundred dollars.

"Going once to Langdon."

Every eye in the room was riveted on Amundsen's sweaty face.

"Going twice to Louie for one thousand one hundred dollars."

Suddenly Amundsen raised his hand like a schoolboy wanting to go to the bathroom. The auctioneer said, "Foster?"

Amundsen said, "One five."

"Mr. Amundsen bids one thousand five hundred dollars.

"Going once."

Louie took out his checkbook.

"Going twice."

Louie looked glassy-eyed into the book, then at Amundsen, then up at the magazine in my hands, then down at the checkbook again. His face seemed to be undergoing alternate waves of fiery redness and icy white. A low, keening sound began to rise from his throat, rising slowly in volume.

I looked at the back of the room. Everybody was standing. I spotted Minkowsky and Stinky standing close together, staring at the scene before the table.

The auctioneer said, "Going three times — and *gone* to Foster Fred Amundsen for one thousand five hundred dollars!"

The collectors in the room began cheering in earnest.

The sound coming from Louie Langdon's throat rose to a scream. His face was crimson, his eyes popping. He dropped his checkbook and reached inside his coat,

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his hand emerging clutching that weird Barsoomian stiletto he'd shown me the day he visited Fremont, Ohio.

He cried, "Die, ulsio, die!" and plunged the stiletto into the chest of Foster Fred Amundsen.

The auctioneer went over the top of the table with astonishing speed. At the same time people from the front row of the audience were swarming over the figures of Amundsen and Langdon. Amundsen had fallen to the floor and lay supine while Langdon crouched over him, jamming that wicked slim dagger into his chest again and again.

Finally they got him off Amundsen, leaving the knife stuck in that poor man's body, blood all over both of them. Langdon stood there, four or five men holding him. "I am the —" something, he shouted, the last word inaudible. "I! I! Louie Lang —" And he collapsed forward, turning suddenly to dead weight and falling across Amundsen's body, dragging two men down with him.

They released his arms and turned him over. He was dead, an expression of sheer, bitter hatred etched on his face. The auctioneer reached down with two fingers and closed Foster Fred Amundsen's eyes, then Louie Langdon's.

Of course that broke up the collector's conference. The hotel detective was on the scene in five minutes; he had the New Kansas City regulars there in ten. There was a coroner's inquest, but there was never any doubt, with all of the witnesses in the hotel ballroom, that the verdict would be murder followed by natural death.

Langdon had worked himself up to apoplexy. Once he'd killed Amundsen, he died himself, before he ever hit the floor.

The only really complicated part of the case, oddly enough, was what would become of that perfect copy of *Nick Neptune's Adventure Magazine.* The coroner seized it as evidence in the investigation of the two deaths. It even has his official seal stamped on the cover. He says he's willing to release it, but he doesn't know who's supposed to get it. Presumably, the conference-sponsoring committee.

Minkowsky and his friend Stinky left the hotel as quickly as they could. They paid me off for my services, such as they were. I had a note from Herman saying that what happened at the auction wasn't my fault and I was entitled to my pay and expenses.

I still don't know who Stinky is.

As for the magazine's ultimate fate, here's my guess. I think that Amundsen's heirs will get his collection, the International Magazine Registry. And he wouldn't leave his estate to anybody

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but other collectors. So in all likelihood they'll stand behind his bid and buy the magazine from the committee.

Of course it isn't quite mint any more, the magazine. It has the coroner's stamp on the cover. Still, it's quite a nice copy.

All of which brings me to the reason why I've told you this whole story, Mr. Bartleby-Ames. I apologize for my habit of going round Robin Hood's barn to tell a story, but that's the way you get when you have to fill a small-town newspaper every week and there just isn't much hard news.

Anyway, Mr. Bartleby-Ames, when all of those magazines were getting assembled back in the Fremont, Ohio, *Times-Gazette* office and I got together with Mort Van Vlack and we put 'em in cartons and carried them out to the storage shed, the very first thing I did was the same thing I do any time any publication comes off my press.

I set two perfect copies aside to send to the Library of Congress to register the copyright. I learned that from old Fred Callister, rest his soul.

Now once that fire struck the shed and the magazines were destroyed, and Herman told me that we never were going to print and distribute any more copies, then of course the magazine was never going to be published. And if it wasn't going to be published, why there was no need to pay the Library of Congress the fee that it takes to register a copyright.

So I just left those two copies right where I'd put them that morning before Herman arrived in his fright wig. Right there in my old steel office safe.

And they're still there now, in New Fremont, Ganymede.

That was the little piece of information that Herman Minkowsky never knew. I tried to tell him in the Muelbach penthouse, but he was going on so he never gave me a chance.

But why I'm writing to you, Mr. Bartleby-Ames, is this. I'm not really much of a collector, myself, but I think I'll hang onto one of the two mint copies in the safe just for a souvenir. As for the other, since you're a dealer in rare books and magazines, I figure you might be very interested in seeing that magazine. You might have some customers who'd be very eager to get ahold of that copy.

I can put that magazine onto a bonded pellet-shuttle to Europa if you'd like to examine it before bidding, or you could come over here to Ganymede.

Please think about it and give me a boosterphone call soon.

Yours truly,
Sanford Hall

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